July 2002
Deep Magic
The E-zine of High Fantasy & Science Fiction
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# Note From the Editors

July 2002

Welcome back for our second publication of the finest fantasy and science fiction the Deep Magic editors have been able to compile. We greatly appreciate your interest in our inaugural, June 2002 Issue. The feedback and submissions we have received have been substantial and quite helpful. We have only started the ascent of the learning curve of publishing a successful and longstanding e-zine. Your feedback has been and will continue to be instrumental in our development.

Having said that, let us hand out some specific compliments and give you, our readers, insight into what we have been up to this month. We were very excited to kick off our June 2002 Issue with an interview and exclusive article by Robin Hobb. We believe her inclusion set a standard of excellence that we will strive to meet every month.

In this issue, we are excited to bring you cover and internal art by Christophe Vacher, whose work has appeared in Walt Disney productions and in galleries in Los Angeles. The short stories we have included will surely entertain you -- as will the new serialized novel, Procyx. We also bring you an article, "Tales of a Talent Gone Good," by Charles Coleman Finlay, administrator of the Online Writing Workshop. These and many other fine offerings make up what we believe is an even stronger second helping of Deep Magic.

You will probably notice a theme in this issue of offering advice for writing improvement. We believe the best way to improve quality of writing is through practice. Take us up on our July Writing Challenge. We received numerous excellent, and maybe even a few less-than-excellent, submissions in response to our June Writing Challenge. Look at the handful we selected to print, and if you think you can do as well or better, give it a try. We are also grateful for all who voted in our poll. Some members of this staff were surprised by the results. Vote in this month's poll and surprise us again.

As we said above, welcome back and please come again.

The Editors
DEEP MAGIC

## Safe Places for Minds to Wander

# Poll: The Best Fantasy Movie of the 20th Century

With the recent releases of Lord of the Rings and Harry Potter, the fantasy genre has been reborn on the silver screen. We, the editors of Deep Magic, started thinking about the best fantasy movie prior to these two. So, in the interest of boredom, we present the July 2002 poll, "The Best Fantasy Movie of the 20th Century!" Please note that this is a "fantasy" only poll. Star Wars and Star Trek fans, please withhold your ire for not seeing your favorite science fiction movies below. That is another topic for another time. In the interest of brevity, sequals have been ignored, or chosen instead of the original. Vote for your favorite 20th Century fantasy movie as listed (and determined by us) to the right. If we didn't list your favorite, vote for "other." If you feel we missed one that absolutely, positively should have been listed, send us an email. If we concede your point (which will have to be eloquent), we just may write a formal, on-our-knees, grovel for forgiveness.

To vote, click anywhere in the poll box to be taken to the poll page on our website.

## Results from the June 2002 Poll

**Who is the Greatest Mentor in Fantasy?**
(results as of June 29, 2002)

- Gandalph (LotR): 35.62%
- Aslan (Narnia): 15.07%
- Merlin (Arthurian Legend): 12.33%
- Albus Dumbledore (Harry Potter): 10.96%
- Belgareth (Belgariad): 10.96%
- Allanon (Shannara): 6.85%
- Dalben (Prydain Chronicles): 4.11%
- Moiraine Sedai (Wheel of Time): 4.11%

# Writing Challenge

Our first writing challenge (see the bottom of the page for a recap) is in the books, and we received a good number of submissions. Below you will find a list of the top selections, with links to what they wrote. We hope you enjoy them. More importantly, however, we hope that those who took the time to write something learned from the exercise. That is what the writing challenge is all about. So if you missed out last month, take a look below and take up our next challenge. Send your writing challenge submission to writingchallenge@amberlin.com. We will post the top selections next month. In the meantime, here are the June 2002 writing challenge top selections:

**Dark Knight** a poem by John Lowe

**The Endless Search** by M.A. Ferguson

**The Dark Night** by Megan Powell

## July 2002 Challenge

**In our June 2002 Issue, Robin Hobb wrote an excellent article about fantasy and science fiction clichés. Many new authors, and even quite a few experienced writers, fall into the trap of relying on clichés, which leaves their writing dull, stale, or even boring. Your assignment this month is to take a fantasy or science fiction cliché and make it new, fresh, and original. If you need ideas about what would be considered a fantasy cliché, read Ms. Hobb's article. If you enjoyed the movie Shrek, you probably enjoyed numerous fantasy/fairy tale clichés given a make-over. In this issue, "Beauty & the Beast" is another example of putting a new twist on old clichés. Give us your best shot in 500 words or less. We have high hopes that your submissions will bring smiles to the editors' faces. Submissions are due by July 20th.**

**June 2002 Writing Challenge:** On the cover of our premier issue, you will find an outstanding illustration by Jonathon Earl Bowser titled, A Dark Knight. His interview and samples of his work are found within this issue, starting on page 6. The challenge is to write a paragraph, chapter, short story, or poem about that illustration in 500 words or less. It can be descriptive, narrative, or any other format you choose. Be creative (sending us a sentence with "a dude on a horse" will probably not make it past our astute editorial panel).

# Writing Challenge Selections

## A Dark Knight
John Lowe

Across the barren waste,
By stalwart horse and steady hand,
Riding heart of answers seeking,
Beneath the moon in pale passing,
Truth to find in Shadowmere,
Ancient glass of Elandere,
Reflections of the inner soul,
The hand of fate and blessing,
Othin looked in waters fair,
Omen for his people to bring,
Pure in heart the mirror sees,
Reveal him now the man of mystery,
Though enemy in tree doth hide,
Empty is his power there,
For never does the Shadowmere lie,
Fates of many is it keeping,
The night is gone,
Away he rides,
Courage in his vision,
Hope within him beats,
Never more to pass these silent heights,
A dark knight in Shadowmere.

## The Endless Search
By M.A. Ferguson

*I am so close! I can hear the horns blowing, the drums beating, pipes chirping in the still air. I mount Corsair's sturdy back and look down at the city below.*

The silver ring was at the bottom of the chest; buried in aeons of dust. A lady's silver ring; too small for any but his littlest finger. There it sat comfortably and was briefly forgotten as he packed his spoils and returned to town.

The dreams began immediately. That night and many after, he walked the streets of the onyx city, hearing the horns cry, captivated by the slender dancers. Each day he woke with the whisper of music in his ears and the memory of flowers. Wine lost its sweetness, food its flavour. Held up against the lithe beauty of the dancers, mortal women looked clumsy, pallid. The world thinned around him.

His first clue he found the marketplace of a small nameless town. A ewer of cloudy pewter had drawn him with its supple lines. In his hands the form was feminine and delicate. He tipped it gently, expecting music, but finding only dust. Next was a horn, the long straight lines standing out among rusted loops of metal. A silver flute had led him further south, and the trail became clearer, surer. Not a day would go by that he would not find some clue of the existence of the onyx city of his dreams. He slept little now; he had no need, for in his ears the dulcet chimes rang even under the sun.

When he found the valley he had quailed. The ravaged land stretched before him, skeletal trees praying to the monochrome sky. He had almost turned back then, almost; a distant whisper cutting through the harp's tune with a devastated cry. But then the dancers had whirled and he nudged Corsair forward into the dark land. Miles of barren wasteland passed but the music led him ever onwards. To the edge of the pool and the onyx city below.

He leaned forward, watching the city shining in the night-dark pool. The dancers were so tiny! Beneath the water they swayed to the drum's dark rhythm; he could not see their faces but the silver pipes sang in his ears. There was no other way. He dove, the waters frothing around him. Down, down, the city lights shining below him. Down, and still down, but the lights came no closer. Down, and then the sharp rocks under his hands and the bitter taste of defeat in his mouth and the horns faded and were gone forever. (continued on next page)

# Writing Challenge Selections

(The Endless Search - cont.)

*I still hear them, in my mind's eye, as I look down nightly upon the onyx city where the dancers sway to the pipes and the drums beat their endless rhythms. We make no mark, Corsair and I, as we circle the glassy pool, endlessly, around and around, looking for a way in.*

*I am beginning to think there may be none.*

## The Dark Night
### By Megan Powell

Mirrors could be avoided. He was a warrior, not some fine noblewoman or primping whore.

Mirrors could be avoided, but not all reflections.

"My face was never so fair," he said. Perhaps to his horse, perhaps to himself, perhaps to the reflection in the pool below.

Or perhaps to the bird, which cawed from the tree above him. He shivered against the night's chill, and cast his gaze once more to the pool of water.

"He glows," he observed, and the raven cawed once more. "He glows like some fey creature, not a son of men."

The rider shivered, though his reflection did not, and felt for his sword. It would be of little use against otherworldly creatures, but it was all the protection he possessed, and it served him well enough against other sons of men.

The reflection also bore a sword, and it was similar to the one he carried. But it, too, glowed, as though imbued with some holy purpose. As though it had never tasted blood, as though its owner had never known the slaughter of a battlefield....

What use was such a sword, or such a warrior?

The raven cawed for a third time. He glanced over his shoulder. Ravens tended to battlefields, but one always followed him. He no longer wondered if it was the same bird.

The raven was not reflected in the pool.

"You should thank me," he said to the raven--his raven, part of the real world. "I feed you well. Doubtless you're double starved, following a man like that."

The bird cocked its head and blinked.

"Aye, starved." He glanced down once more into the pool, stared at the unmarred face and untested blade. The reflection might look fine, he might seem to have some great purpose to his journey, but that must surely be illusory. "The raven starved, and perhaps a village or two was fired, because the fine young lord declined to raise a hand."

Perhaps a village or two was fired. Perhaps a garrison had not fallen through treachery. Perhaps....

Perhaps many things.

He looked away from the reflection and urged his horse onward into the night.

# THE OGRUS QUEST

## By G. Allen Wilbanks

The Ogrus horde descended on the tiny Elven village of Dalgaffar. Towering beasts covered in mats of thick black hair flowed into the neatly cobbled streets, waddling on gnarled and bowed legs, or lowering long muscular arms to run on all fours. Tiny, angry red eyes peered from beneath great ridges of bone, seeking victims while powerful taloned hands and long wicked teeth laid waste to all around them.

From the high mountains, where they had remained quietly hidden for generations, they came. A hundred of the great lumbering monsters, leaving in their wake toppled homes, ruined crops and tiny, broken Elf bodies. The raid lasted no more than an hour, but for the frightened residents of Dalgaffar it seemed an eternity of destruction and mayhem. As the brutes returned to the mountains and their hidden lairs, the Elves were left to wonder what had led to the sudden attack. While dangerous, the Ogrus generally kept to themselves, choosing to vent their aggressions on each other or the occasional traveler brave enough – or foolish enough – to wander into their territory.

From the high mountains, where they had remained quietly hidden for generations, they came. A hundred of the great lumbering monsters, leaving in their wake toppled homes, ruined crops and tiny, broken Elf bodies.

Despite the numbers of Ogrus that ravaged the village, they caused surprisingly little actual damage. But damage there was, and five Elves lost their lives as well. Three bucks, one woman and a child had cast their souls to the wind. The survivors mourned their losses, cremated their dead, then rebuilt and moved on with their lives. But the unprovoked attack proved to be only the first of many.

Luck Browntupp stood outside the rundown thatched house with his hand poised to knock. Indecision and fear twisted in his stomach and caused him to pause before attracting the attention of the elder Elf inside. The Ogrus continued to threaten Dalgaffar, attacking sporadically and unpredictably. Many brave bucks had tried to mount a defense against the monsters, but they had failed to stop the marauding beasts. No race could match an Elf's skill with a bow, yet incredibly, Elven archers consistently fired bolts wide of their intended targets when the Ogrus attacked. Even the few arrows that found their marks seemed to bounce off or pass harmlessly through the invaders. Luck's own father had fallen victim in the last attack while valiantly attempting to defend his home and family. The memory of his sire's brutal death hardened Luck's resolve, and his fist fell firmly on the wooden door.

He raised his hand to knock a second time after almost a full minute passed with no response, but the door swung open under his raised fist and before him stood a stooped and shriveled old Elf. The ancient creature clutched a heavy shawl around his shoulders – though the day was already growing uncomfortably warm – which hung at odd angles on his thin wasted frame. At three inches shy of four feet tall, Luck was tall for an Elf, and the figure in the doorway was forced to crane his neck awkwardly to meet his eyes. He peered up at Luck suspiciously. "What do you want, buck? I've no time to be tormented by the likes of you."

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# Tales of a Talent Gone Good

by Charles Coleman Finlay

When I started writing my first novel in 1994, I had a three year plan. I was going to write -- and by golly sell! -- three novels in that amount of time or quit writing.

Things didn't quite work out according to plan.

I didn't finish three novels, although I did finish one monster-size novel three times. I didn't sell it either, or even get anything more than a form rejection for my trouble.

And, oddly enough, I didn't quit writing either.

At first, I believed I could go it alone, the writer sitting alone at his desk pounding out page after page at the keyboard and producing brilliance in isolation. Some writers do this, I'm told. I wasn't one of them. My writing had problems and I was blind to some of them.

So, after a couple years of this, I hooked up with a local writers' group. There were good people in it, including some who'd had a bit of success, and I learned a lot there too. But after a time, I realized that we weren't all driven to the same extent. I didn't have time to grouse about the unfairness of publishing and hard times for new writers -- other people were breaking into the business all the time, and I wanted to be one of them!

See, that's the secret. If you want to be good, you have to find people who are better than you and hang with them.

By this point though, I'd been writing seriously for almost five years, blocking out hours on my schedule for it every day and working hard at it. I had improved as much as I could, and I still wasn't good enough.

That's when I found a new writers' workshop forming online. The other writers I hooked up with were spread across the globe from the Arctic Circle to Australia, but they understood what I was trying to do, and they worked at it a lot harder than I did.

See, that's the secret. If you want to be good, you have to find people who are better than you and hang with them. Okay, not all of you need to do that. You -- the one over there working by yourself, sitting alone at your desk, pounding out page after page of brilliance in isolation -- you're golden. That doesn't work for the rest of us poor suckers.

No, the rest of us have to knuckle down and study published writers, the folks we admire and want to be like. We have to figure out technique and craft. You can do that by yourself, sure, but it's a lot easier when there are other writers around saying, "But what about this? Have you tried this?"

The company of good people, smart people, talented people, tends to bring out the same qualities in us. Well, it did in me. Maybe your experience is or has been or will be different.

But I joined the online workshop, and I was around a lot of people smarter and more talented than I was, and while they were off selling their first novels and pro stories, I finally started getting better again.

Six years and a couple months after I sat down with my three year plan, I sold my first piece of fiction: a little eight page story to the Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction. I can remember opening the envelope, thinking there was another rejection, then seeing the check...

The dogs are still scared whenever I open the mail.

And I'm still writing. I haven't sold that novel yet, but I've sold eight or nine stories now, including a novel excerpt, and I'm having fun, hanging with good people, and finding new ways to improve my writing.

So here you are, trying to write. You're not the go-it-alone writer creating brilliance in isolation, although you gave that a shot, and you haven't been able to find a local face-to-face group that fires you up.

What about an online writers' group? Have you tried that yet?

* * *

*Charles Coleman Finlay's stories have appeared in the Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction and elsewhere. His alternate history "We Come Not to Praise Washington" appears in the August, 2002 issue of F&SF. He is a long-time member and now administrator of the Online Writing Workshop for SF&F, but has good things to say about other online writers' groups as well. Just ask him. (ccfinlay@excite.com)*

# Andie and I
## by Ryan Peterson

"Welcome, Doctor Carson," the mechanical voice of the security computer greeted as I entered the lab. For the past five years, I had been working with Kathryn – Doctor Quillen – in room 113 of the university robotics building. Stepping into the room, I placed my security card back into my pocket. Once the security cameras could see that I had cleared the doorway, the door slid shut behind me, locking itself with a mechanical ka-klik. Inside the lab, were rows and rows of tables full of spare computer parts and diagnostics equipment. And over to the right, sectioned off by hanging plastic flaps, sat the "clean-room" where all our most delicate work was done. It had its own circulation system that kept the air inside moving, blowing out through the seams between hanging flaps and under the walls themselves. This kept dust from having a good chance at settling on the surfaces and possibly upsetting calibration or interfering with circuit board assembly.

I had started to work with Kathryn just after earning my own doctorate in robotics, and the past four years had been spent working with Andie. Now there was an interesting combination. Doctor Quillen with Andie. Both highly scientific, logical minds. Both thriving on knowledge. But they were both quite distinctly unique from each other in more ways than I could even begin to name.

When we had started our work with Andie, there were a number of people who just laughed at us. They were certain that we would never be able to achieve our goals. And, at the time, I was certain that they were wrong. In the end, however, it turned out that none of us had had even the vaguest inkling as to where our experiments would take us.

Andie turned his hips, wobbling slightly, and then stepped toward the chair, with a rather awkward stagger. "Andie fell down," he replied.

Kathryn had set up her computer and workstation right next to the clean-room. That way she could "more efficiently work in both stations at the same time if need be." Aside from the neatly piled and organized stacks of paper, her workstation was surprisingly clean and free of distraction. The only piece of ornamentation was a silver picture frame with an old, folded picture inside. She only kept it there out of respect for her mother who had given it to her a couple of years back.

In the back of the room there was another large metal door that lead to a smaller, more secure lab. The room had originally been meant for simple storage of valuable and delicate equipment. Once we started working with Andie, however, we had converted it to a second laboratory and simply stored everything on the rows of tables in the main room. It also doubled as Andie's room, of sorts. He stayed in there whenever we didn't heed him.

I turned and began to walk toward the clean-room in the back, limping slightly on my right leg. As I neared the clean-room, I heard Kathryn call out from within.

"Back so soon?" I could hear a slightly startled sound to her voice.

"Soon?" I responded. "It's nine in the morning. Have you been in there all night?"

I could hear her set down some piece of equipment and push her stool away from the table, sliding it on the white floor. One of the flaps of the clean room was pulled away and Kathryn stepped out.

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# Standing on the Shoulders of Giants
## by Jeff Wheeler

Becoming a writer is full of unfairness. This is especially true for a budding author trying to enter the mainstream. Granted, writers of science fiction and fantasy are hardly mainstream (unless your last name happens to be Rowling). But just because the latest Robert Jordan sequel will never earn a Pulitzer does not mean his fans enjoy reading it any less. Or make it any less unfair that Jordan can get away with creating a world so vast and complex that it takes 900 pages to move sixteen characters across two days in the story. If an unpublished author started a first novel like that, the rejection letter would come back so fast that the glue sticking the envelope shut would still be moist. How can good authors get away with such injustices? How can they break so many rules?

Another way to look at this question is to contemplate and explore what exactly makes good writers good. I recently visited an on-line bulletin board dedicated to Robin Hobb. Someone with an identity like 'Mongrel88741' had posted a question to the forum asking for advice (from other Robin Hobb fans) as to other favorite fantasy authors. I could hardly find any agreement at all between them, except for the fact that they all adored Robin Hobb. Try Raymond Feist's RIFTWAR SAGA (Hisspit: no, it's horrible! It's too Tolkien! Death and vomit to you all!) or Terry Brooks' Shannara series (Fitzman: he's horrible, I can't stand the loser), or Ursula Le Guin (MollylovesFool: Le Guin? Le Snooore!!). Now, all three are very popular fantasy authors or were at some time in some person's life. Yet, even though the posters on the bulletin board loved Hobb, there was not another common denominator. I found that very interesting.

So I came to this conclusion. Good writers don't win everyone over. They win enough people over.

So I came to this conclusion. Good writers don't win everyone over. They win enough people over.

If you join a writing workshop (and I encourage and endorse doing just that), you will find reviewers who love and hate your work. You will find some that pick apart every dangling participle and others that give nothing but praise (and somehow miss that you used 'said sweetly' as a dialogue tag 22 times). If you tried to modify your story based on thirty reviewers' opinions, you would still find another thirty reviewers telling you to rewrite it again. Furthermore, it would be impossible to follow every reviewer's suggestion because inevitably, reviewers will give conflicting advice. (i.e. "I loved the piece, but I wanted more detail, more world-building…" "I liked it, but it was too wordy. Focus on the action and cut out the unnecessary descriptions.") This can be a horribly frustrating process, but helpful as well. Sometimes reviewers flog others for the sins they had flogged out of them. I know I have done that.

So who can you trust? Whose opinion really matters? Some say that only the author's opinion matters. It is your novel after all. But truly, in the publishing world, there is really only one opinion that matters, and that is the publisher's opinion. Why? Because the publisher assumes the risk -- not the author.

Why can Terry Brooks or Elizabeth Haydon or C.S. Lewis (well, forget C.S. Lewis because he's dead and has not published anything in years) get away with breaking many, if not all, of the rules that writing workshops so vehemently condemn? Because a publisher took the chance that

there would be enough readers who would like the piece to take an incredible business risk of investing its own money to publish it and pray that YahooGroups would end up with at least one forum devoted to the author.

Good writers can break the rules and get away with it. They can start sentences with a conjunction. They can sprinkle dialogue tags liberally through a novel (admit it, David Eddings is the King of Dialogue Tags and the Duke of Unnecessary Yet Often Quite Hilarious Adverbs). They can use green eyes and clichés with reckless abandon. But what they can also do – and do so very well – is create an author's voice that is so interesting, with details that sing to our souls, that we find our Editor self falling asleep on our shoulder, and we read with a hunger. Not everyone shares this hunger with the same authors. But if this feeling sounds familiar, then you have read a good author. At least one who is good to you.

So unless you have a Yahoogroup dedicated to you (and please, let Deep Magic know if you do), you must do what it takes to develop that writer's voice. Poor grammar and contrived plots will choke that voice. A workshop can help you purge the fleas that may be lodged in your manuscript. If you get ten decent reviews and eight of them tell you that your protagonist is unsympathetic, it might be a good indicator that a publisher will as well. As Robin Hobb wrote in last month's issue, re-inventing clichés can be a challenging and rewarding enterprise. But make it your own. Use old ideas in a new way. Tolkien used elves in his books, but he did not invent the mythology of elves. What he did, however, went far beyond what most fantasy authors are willing to do. He invented a new language to add richness and depth to his work, and there are people today who still study how to speak it.

Bernard of Clairvaux once said many centuries ago, "We are as pigmies standing on the shoulders of giants." Were C.S. Lewis and Tolkien the giants? Is Anne McCaffrey one? Was Shakespeare the only giant? Are Terry Brooks and George R.R. Martin the pigmies? I don't think so. Pigmies and giants are born the way they are. The ability to write well is something that can be developed with time, perseverance, thick skin, and some imagination. And it is even something that can turn into a career if you are really good at it.

Who said writing fantasy or science fiction novels was easy? Ask any author who has had to re-write and re-read their own novels more than five times. Even Robin Hobb ends up loathing her books by the time she has to go through the galley proofs. She told me so.

# Beauty and the Beast

## By Steve Poling

The Fairy paused as she entered the Motley Unicorn Tavern. Frowning, she wondered what bothered her. She turned on her heel and went back outside. The man sitting outside looked familiar. As she studied his face, he looked up.

"Hi Fairy." The man smiled warmly as if Fairy were a long-lost friend.

She furrowed her brow and tried in vain to remember. "I know you, don't I?"

"Sure." The man extended his hand. It was a bit dirty. "I just wanted to thank you from the bottom of my…"

"Beast! I turned you into a Beast--oh, decades ago." He continued to hold his hand out in an offered handshake. Embarrassed, Fairy shook it.

The man shook his head, smiling wistfully, "Best years of my life, I got to tell you. Thanks again."

**Beast! I turned you into a Beast -- oh, decades ago.**

"Shouldn't you still be a Beast?" Slowly, Fairy remembered the terms of the enchantment. "Who's the lucky woman? Where is she?" Fairy looked around.

A cloud passed before the sun of Beast's smile, leaving a trace of regret. "Back at the castle." Fairy looked at his clothes. They were well-worn and patched.

Fairy leaned close and whispered. "You aren't slumming are you? Checking out whether your loyal subjects are happy or something like that?"

"Nah, you got me confused with another Prince. What you see is what I got."

Fairy was astonished. "What happened?"

Beast shrugged good-naturedly. "I'd love to tell you all about it over beers, but I'm tapped out."

"But your fortune?"

"You know, it's hard to talk with my mouth so dry."

Fairy grinned. "All right, I'm buying. Come on in."

Beast winked and followed her into the Motley Unicorn. They settled into a comfortable booth in the back.

* * *

As enchantments go, mine wasn't all that bad. I always liked being out in the woods and I was a pretty good hunter. The best part was the wolves. They sensed that I was pretty much one of the guys. They let me join their pack whenever I really wanted to cut loose. And those she-wolves…

So, there I was just having a hoot. I had this enchanted castle, so when the weather got really cold and nasty, I could sleep with a warm roof over my head. The wolves preferred the stables, but I'd grown accustomed to silk sheets. The castle was pretty good about the food, too. After a while raw caribou gets old, and a decent prime rib cooked just so really hits the spot. I had it made.

You probably already know that no good deed goes unpunished.

I turned off my enchanted castle's invisibility spell, left the door open, and told it to fix some

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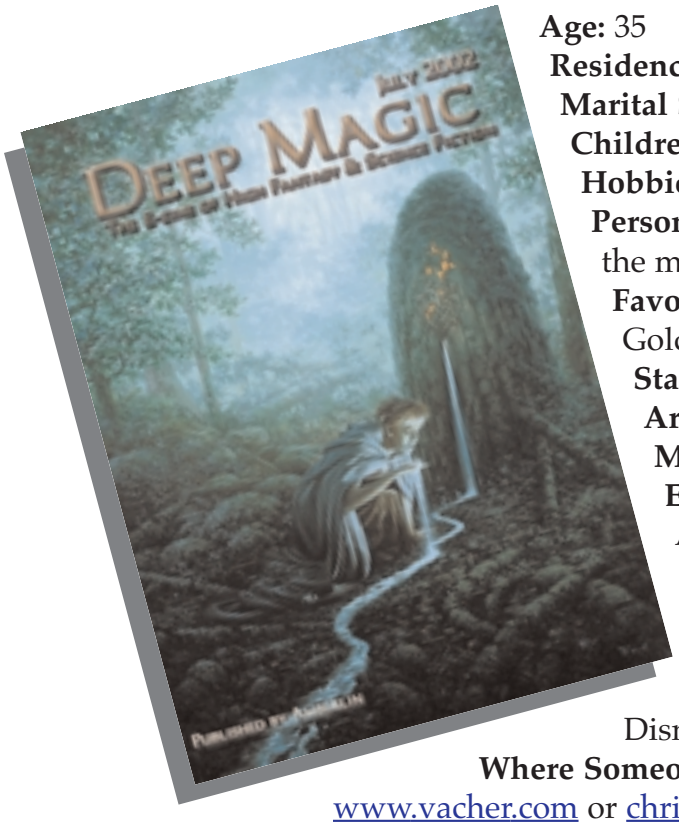
# Christophe Vacher




**Age:** 35
**Residence:** Toluca Lake
**Marital Status:** Single
**Children:** None
**Hobbies:** Martial arts, meditation, horseback riding,...
**Personal Quote:** What the mind can concieve and believe, the mind can achieve.
**Favorite Book or Author:** For the present days: Joel Goldsmith ("The Art of Meditation", and others).
**Started Painting In:** 1983
**Artist Most Inspired By:** Too many to mention
**Mediums You Work In:** Mostly oils
**Educational/Training Background:** Fine Arts schools, Animation (mostly Disney people).
**Schools Attended:** France
**Where Your Work Has Been Published or Displayed**: Morpheus gallery, Powell street gallery, Spectrum, Videogames, and all the artwork done for Disney movies.
**Where Someone Can Buy Your Art or Contact You Professionally:** www.vacher.com or christophe.vacher@excite.com
**Website URL:** www.vacher.com

**Q: How did you come to be an artist?**
A: I was trying to draw before I knew how to write. I guess this really determines what you want to do in Life. I was supposed to be a comicbook artist in France, but Destiny had a different plan for me.

**Q: How would you describe your work?**
A: Surreal, mystical, with no concession to the usual "Dungeons and Dragons" environment, just true to itself: reaching out to the unknown, the unseen and the unexplained.

**Q: Where do you find your inspiration?**
A: Mostly in music (from Loreena Mc Kennitt and Enya, to Dead Can Dance and Metallica, or Debussy and Satie). Movie soundtracks are equally a major inspiration for my work. Traveling as well.

**Q: What inspired this piece? (Tell us its story)**
A: I was listening to Loreena Mc Kennitt if I remember well. And I just saw this image. That's generally how it happens.

**Q: What do you consider your influences?**
A: Way too many to tell them all, but influences can come from anywhere: Art movements (like Symbolism, Art Nouveau, Realism,etc...), History, Architecture, movies,...

**Q: What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?**
A: Probably entering the Disney studios and realizing that I had a lot to learn technically, that there were amazing artists there who could teach me these things, and that it would change my personal work forever.

**Q: What trends are you seeing in the Sci-Fi/Fantasy genre?**
A: Paradoxally, I think I'm not as much into Sci-Fi and Fantasy as I used to. I don't follow any trend and don't really care for it. What I try to express is more related to an impulse created by emotions, states of mind or visions. It goes through you and needs to come out. So, even though I work a lot for the movie industry or other types of companies, I feel my personal work is more and more adequate for galleries.

# Procyx
## Chronicle of the End Star of Grief
## Book One: Days of Destruction
### by O.R. Savage

*Dedication:*
*To the Warriors of Light*
*in this, or any universe!*

The End Star!
It is as Hell and Heaven in One.
It beckons us to Terrors and Joys
Beyond the reach of thought,
To shine in life on Endless Worlds
And give all Gifts of Wonderment.

-- Talar
The First Book of the Brotherhood of Light
Origin Unknown-- First discovered in
The Persepolis Sector

**Prophecy of the End Star of Grief**

"The Infidels from heaven come,
"To tempt and enslave;
"Shall drive away the Holy Men;
"And many to the grave!

"The Guardians shall rise in strength
"The City to make bright!
"The Martyr's son shall slay the same;
"And call forth heaven's blight.

"For Procyx shall, in purest blue,
"Appear with holy song.
"The stars shall die in awesome fright--
"Till Zorl shall right all wrong.

"The Holy Man and Infidel,
"From heaven they shall fall;
"The armies of the Dragon slay--
"Lest Procyx claim us all.

"Twelve mighty Warriors, they shall lead
"The Eye to shine with power;
"The Golden Death of Zorl direct;
"And darken Procyx's glower!"

# Prologue
# The Martyrdom

Ambylor hid in the fire. He crouched well below the flame line so that if seen from without, his form would be lost among the wood and debris. He watched the boys--spears held ready for throwing, milling about, searching for any trace of where he might have gone. One of them followed his footsteps to the edge of the fire and stopped. Ambylor's staff lay on the ground beside it. The boy picked it up, looking for the footsteps to appear at some other place nearby, but there were none. Ambylor saw amazement cross the boy's face as he turned to gaze carefully into the flames.

"What are you doing?" the group's leader yelled with a rasp. "He's not in there, you fool!"

"His staff," the boy replied. "He dropped it here, near the fire."

"So if he did!" Harsh sarcasm filled the leader's voice. He strode over to the fire, yanked the staff from the younger boy's grasp, and hurled it down. "As you stand here beguiled by the flames, he escapes further into the woods."

"But he is one of the Most High Noblemen . . ."

"And he bleeds like any poor cow when he's stabbed. Come on. Let's spread out."

Ambylor watched the lad back away, unconvinced. At last the group dispersed, moving silently into the looming trees. Soon, all that could be heard were the crackling of the logs breaking under the heat and hushed roar of fire. He waited another full minute before venturing forth from the flames.

He shook the ash and dust from the deep sleeves of his crimson robe. They shed like water

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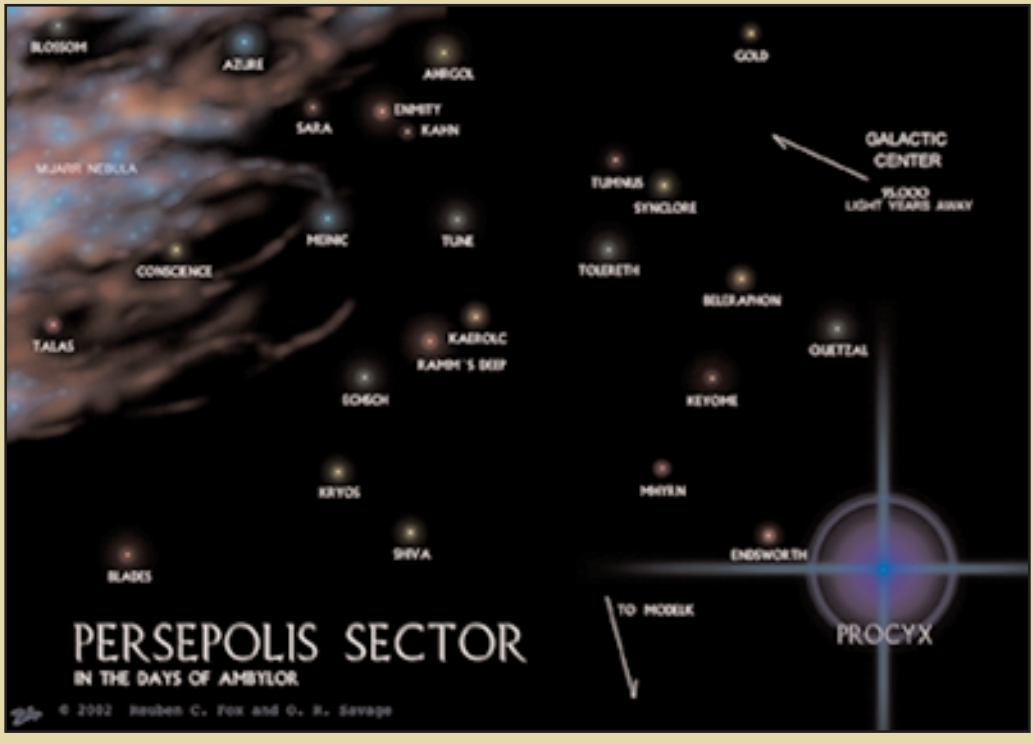


Procyx offers a glimpse at a vast universe. The map to your left shows the area during the days of Ambylor. More maps will follow in future chapters. Click on the map to be taken to a larger version on the Deep Magic web-site.

continued from Issue 1

# Landmoor
by Jeff Wheeler

## VI

Dujahn shifted in his saddle, squinting against the night sky at the black tangles of the Shadows Wood. The air was warm and muggy, but cool breaths of wind teased his neck only to vanish beneath the hot dampness of the moors. He sat on a stolid bay mare out in the middle of the grasslands, silently, feeling sweat trickle down the sides of his face. He mopped it up on the back of his glove. "Where are you, Folkes?" he muttered, scanning the trees.

Twisting in the saddle, Dujahn turned around and stared up at Landmoor. It rose high on a lopsided hill, surrounded by misty ponds and protected on the west by a bend in the river. The moon bathed the marsh grass in blue and caused winks of light to dance on the pools. From high in the watchtowers, torches burned brightly, making the fortress shimmer with patches of yellow and orange. It was dark and he was too far away to see any of the sentries patrolling the outer walls, and he knew they couldn't see him either. Even if they could – what was a lone horseman compared with an army poised within the forest? A mosquito buzzed near his ear, and he swatted it sharply. He wore a plain brown tunic over a shirt of embroidered leather, tight at the sleeves. His hair was also brown and his face had an ordinary shape. To some he looked lazy – to others he looked bored. It made him perfect as a spy.

Dujahn wiped his mouth, trying to count the number of months he had been on this assignment. His true employer, the Gray Legion, was a ring of mercenary spies that snooped into just about every kingdom's affairs east and west of Dos-Aralon. They had a few well-placed spies in the court of Dos-Aralon, mostly women, and so far King don Rion had refused to hire any or even try and purge them from the realm. Dujahn didn't exactly enjoy working for the Bandit Rebellion, but

### Correction Notice

After the June, 2002 issue of DEEP MAGIC was released, several astute readers pointed out a problem with several placenames in the map of LANDMOOR. We agreed that LANDMOOR containted some similarities with content owned by Wizards of the Coast. To avoid any suggestion of impropriety, we consulted with the author to modify the map and change the text within the manuscript. Once the fix was in place, we updated the download file right away. This was done within the first week of June. If your issue shows the Kingdom of Sheldomar, you have the old version. The new name is the Kingdom of Avisahn. Other changes include: two names of the Shae trinity were changed (Solander = Keasorn, Vanere = Vannier); references to the inland valley called the Kayolend were removed. Feel free to download the map or the first issue again to get an updated version.

Best regards,
The Editors

at least a Bandit commander was better than counting gnats for some regiment weasel. He smirked. The Bandit Rebellion needed spies and the Gray Legion needed a foot in the politics from these lands. He hoped that Lord Ballinaire would eventually ask for his services. Now that would be an interesting assignment! he thought.

In the distance, Dujahn heard the trample of hooves coming down the Iron Point Road. It was the only road through the Shadows Wood and so overgrown in places that wagons had to waddle just to get through. Plunging from the thick cedar trees came a huge roan, its hooves clomping against the paving stones marking the old Shae highway. Dujahn shook his head, wondering if Folkes was a fool or if he just didn't care how much noise he made. Gripping the handle of the hooded lantern he had secured around the saddle horn, Dujahn lifted it and pointed it towards the inbound horseman. He raised the shutter quickly and then closed it. A single wink of light went out.

The noise of the hooves slowed and hissed into the grass. Commander Folkes eased his horse up to where Dujahn waited for him. He was big – nearly as tall as General Dairron, the commander of the Kingshadow regiment who had arrived earlier that day. Dujahn was always comparing people, sizing them up and matching them against others he knew. It was how he kept things straight in his mind. As a Gray Legion spy, he needed that. Always look for the unusual. With Folkes, that wasn't hard to do. The Bandit commander's mismatched suit of armor showed an almost absent-minded laziness instead of tokens of his battles and opponents. A breastplate taken from a vanquished Knight of the Blade. His sword from a Vale Shae. The greaves and gauntlets were of different design, all scratched and marred beyond polishing. Unique – Folkes liked it that way. Dujahn suppressed a smile. The Provost Marshals of the East Kingdoms would have laughed at the Bandit commander with scorn. But then again, they were more known for fastidiousness, not their battle sense.

"How long...you've been waiting?" Folkes asked, trying to catch his breath. He lifted a leather flask to his lips and took a long drink. It smelled like ale.

"Sunset," Dujahn answered simply. "How was the ride from Anikesh, Commander?"

"Long and thorny," Folkes answered, wiping his mouth. "I saw a few patrols of knights, but none of them saw me."

"Well…they would have been banned surprised to catch the Commander of the Shardmist Regiment out all alone." Dujahn sat back and smirked. "Now, do you think they would have hung you right there – or bothered dragging you all the way to Owen Draw for a trial first?"

Landmoor

click to view larger image

Folkes frowned and corked the flask. "I don't pay you for jokes, Dujahn. I pay you for information. Why were there so many patrols?"

Dujahn shrugged noncommittally. "The Kiran Thall have been busy down here, Commander. Whenever they raze a village, don Rion sends down the knights to chase them away. It's that simple. Word in don Rion's court these days is that he wants to send the dukes of Amberdian and Cypher on a march down here to hang some Bandits."

Folkes nodded and let out a big breath and snorted with contempt. "That rumor again? It costs too much and it takes too long. Amberdian is spineless and Cypher won't go it alone. Nothing before year-end at least. Let's

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Many in Dalgaffar viewed Dallen Olggott as a ranting, senile fool. The Elf claimed to see glimpses of the future, but his visions were often distorted and his attempts to explain them sounded to most like pure gibberish. The villagers tolerated Olggott as a harmless crackpot; a source of amusement and idle talk behind the hands, but they gave no real thought to his claims. A few, however, believed Olggott had a gift. They even suggested the wizened old Elf descended directly from the Nostri, a legendary branch of the Elven race that could predict events years in the future as easily as predicting a falling rock will strike the earth. Luck's father had been one to believe Nostri blood flowed in old Olggott's veins, and Luck could remember many evenings listening to his sire rant angrily, defending the Elder from a deprecating comment he had overheard earlier in the day. Have they forgotten so soon, he would lament to the floor as he paced back and forth, how Olggott diverted a war between Humans and Elves by finding the Human King's crown when he believed it to be stolen by Elves? Or when he predicted the flood in time for the village to divert the river harmlessly away? His dam had flapped her hand at his sire and pleaded with him to stop frightening poor Luck and his sister, but the older buck insisted the stories were true and it would be a grave disservice to lie and say they were not.

Luck now stood outside Olggott's door, hoping the old Nostri might have one last prediction left in his wasted body.

"Please, Elder," he said respectfully, wringing his hands together behind his back. "I haven't come here to torment you, sir. I came with a request. To plead, actually. The Ogrus killed my father not two days past, and I fear many more will die needlessly. I came to you because the Ogrus must be stopped and I am praying you might know how the deed may be done."

Olggott peered more closely into Luck's face for a moment. "You are Jannus Browntupp's child, aren't you? I am sorry to hear an Ogru killed him. He was a good, brave buck. But I do not know if I can help. Let me have your hand." Luck held out his hand as directed, and the old Elf took it in his own withered palm. "Hmmm. Maybe. Maybe. Come inside. We will talk about the Ogrus."

A few guttering candles provided weak light inside Olggott's home. Thick tanned hides draped every window to block out the sunlight, and the Elder quickly closed the door behind Luck to plunge the interior back into shadow. "I hope you do not mind the dark, little buck, but my eyes are not as strong as they once were, and too much light causes a fierce ache in my skull. Take a seat there by the table. I hope you do not need any food or drink because I have none to offer you."

"No, thank you, Elder. I only need information. And, if you please, my name is Luck."

When Luck had seated himself in the chair indicated, Olggott settled himself into a padded couch opposite him. The old Elf closed his eyes and appeared to fall asleep right in front of him. When Olggott did not move for fully five minutes, Luck finally spoke.

"Sir? Are you awake?"

Without opening his eyes Olggott responded. "Of course I'm awake. Do you think I'm senile? Or maybe you think I'm so old I just up and died right here on my couch. No, buck, I'm awake. And I will do any talking there is to be done. You may speak only when I ask you a question. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Elder," replied Luck, beginning to wonder if maybe his sire had been wrong and the old crank was as crazy as others said.

"The Ogrus that have come out of the mountains have been bothering me," he began. "I don't understand why such a territorial race would leave their homes and come down on us in such large numbers. In the past we have seen individuals go rogue, but never groups. When I try to see

them to predict their raids, all I find are normal tribes with no intentions of leaving their mountain lairs. There is plenty of food and the tribes are not at war with each other. They should not be attacking. They have no need. No reason.

"So I began to search elsewhere. I sought to find how they might be defeated when they do attack. I now know there is no army or organized defense capable of turning them back."

"Then it's hopeless," said Luck. "We must leave or be killed."

"You are talking again, buck," snapped Olggott with his eyes still closed. "I did not say I found nothing. Do you wish to hear the rest, or shall I let you carry the conversation while Elves die around us?" When Luck remained silent, Olggott nodded and continued. "I did find one path that could turn the Ogrus away from us. The future is very difficult to see clearly. I believe this is because our hope lies not with an army or even a group, but rather it will be one Elf. I do not know who this Elf will be, however. Mayhap you will be the one to end this threat. But I do not know that for sure just yet."

For the first time since bringing Luck into his house, Olggott opened his eyes and stared directly at the young Elf. "Maybe. Maybe," he repeated enigmatically. He lapsed once more into silence for several minutes. Luck held his tongue firmly, though he ached to cry out in frustration and yell What? What? What do you see?

"Oh, you are a mystery to me, Mr. Luck Browntupp. I can find little pieces of potential, but no definitive outcome. I may only be wasting your time and mine, but I will tell you what I see. You must leave Dalgaffar and travel west. I do not know how far or for how long. But you must leave tomorrow morning, or not at all. Only when you join with Red and Yellow can you return and defeat the Ogrus. And you will never join with Yellow until you find Blue."

"What in the Fiery Wall does that mean? Join with red and yellow by finding blue? That's gibberish. Join with a red what? Find a blue what? I need more than that."

"I do not have more than that. I have told you everything I can. Your future is almost a blank wall to me."

"That's not good enough!" Luck cried. Fear and desperation began to fuel an unreasoning anger within him. He rose from his seat. "I came for help, and you're telling me to just walk away from my home, my family and friends, with no explanation as to why. That's insane. The other Elves were right. You're just a crazy old Elf talking riddles. I'm sorry I ever came here."

"Go west. Join with Red. Find Blue and join with Yellow. Then you can come home." Olggott closed his eyes once more and refused to respond further to Luck's shouted questions and pleas.

The frustrated young Elf finally stormed out of the house, slamming the door as he left. The shriveled senile son of a Nostri had given him nothing. No sane Elf would ever act on such a miserable stream of nonsense.

Yet, the next morning, Luck packed a travel bag, slung his bow and quiver over one shoulder, and headed west.

Luck traveled for several days with absolutely no idea where he was going or what he was looking for. Each morning he woke late and ate a leisurely breakfast of cheese, jerked meat, and hard trail bread before starting the journey again. He rested frequently in the heat of the later afternoons and stopped early each evening. Once, while refilling his canteens in a sparkling clear stream, he decided on impulse to strip off his dusty trail clothes and take a brief swim. The brief swim turned into a four-hour delay, as he figured his clothes could use a wash as well, and while

they dried in the sun, he stretched himself out upon a rock and dozed in the comfortable warmth of the day. Luck did not concern himself unduly with the lost time. With no set destination, he saw no need to hurry.

He trod a well-worn Human trade road, packed down to the consistency of rock by generations of men and their wagons drawn by the huge horses they favored for transportation. During the past few days, several men and their animals had passed Luck along this road, but he had seen them and heard them coming soon enough to seek cover in the trees or high brush or any cover offered away from the road. He did not fear Humans, but Elves generally avoided contact with them since they were considered unpredictable. Many Humans liked Elves and were quick to befriend a traveling buck on his own, but a very few, for whatever reasons, did not care for Luck's kind and could be quite dangerous. So he continued his lonely trek, avoiding anyone and everyone who might cross his path.

On the fifth day, late into the afternoon, Luck had decided to begin hunting for a suitable spot to pitch camp. Although physically he still felt strong and able to continue walking for several hours yet, mentally he was drained. After traveling for five days with his only direction a raving lunatic's promise of maybe this and maybe that, Luck began wondering if perhaps the time had come to simply turn around and go home. He needed to face the fact that only a tiny thread of desperation had brought him this far, and that thread had finally snapped. Perhaps it had broken even before he had gone to see crazy Olggott. Luck had wanted so badly to be able to stop the Ogrus that he had deluded himself into believing that following Olgott's hazy vision served some purpose. Now, he believed that all he had accomplished was to run away from the problem, rather than stay and face it.

Luck stopped and stared west along the hard packed clay trail as it wound along the grass fields in front of him and disappeared up into a small cluster of green hills. He decided that he would go no further than those hills. Once there he would make camp, start a small fire, perhaps even hunt – a little warm food for the first time in almost a week would be nice – then after a good night's rest he would turn home.

With a mixture of relief and sorrow that the useless march had reached an end, Luck strode for his last campsite while traveling west. Long before he reached the promising green hills, however, Luck heard the distinctive clip-clop of a horse moving from the west toward him. Although he could not yet see the animal and its rider through the wall of grass growing all around, he could tell from the sound it was a lone traveler moving without any noticeable hurry. He stepped away from the road into the tall grass and brush and let himself blend into the surrounding vegetation. It took very little time to see he had guessed correctly, and Luck's jaw fell open in wonder as a bearded Human moved into view sitting casually astride a roan stallion. The man wore leather breeches and a light cloth shirt under a hard-tanned leather vest. The vest appeared thick and solid enough to offer some protection from a blade or arrow, but would not restrict mobility significantly in battle. Across his back, he carried a great steel sword with a leather-wrapped pommel jutting up over his right shoulder. The sword and clothing marked him clearly in Luck's eyes as a soldier. The horse, too, wore a leather breastplate as a shield from lance or sword, and drawn on the plate was a crest depicting a metal gauntlet closed into a fist and holding a single small flower.

The man and his beast were huge, even for a normal Human and horse, but their size was not what had shocked and amazed Luck into immobility. It was their color. They were red! A great shaggy shock of red hair covered the man's face and head. His leathers shone crimson in the sunlight. Breeches, boots and saddle. His horse. Even the tiny flower resting in the gauntlet was red.

Luck began to dare hope that his quest might not be so hopeless as he had recently come to believe.

But if this man were truly the source of the Red that Olggott had told him about, then he had to make contact with him. He must plead with the Human soldier to join him in his attempt to free his home from the Ogrus. But it could be dangerous. The man might not be convinced of Luck's sincerity. What if this great red traveler did not like Elves and perhaps saw Luck as some kind of enemy. Or, perhaps he simply would not care about the plight of Luck's family and friends and choose to ignore his request. Luck shook his head to clear it of all the useless clutter. He would never gain the stranger's help if he hid in the grass all day. He must make his presence known.

Luck stepped out of his hiding place and moved to the center of the road, waiting patiently for the human to ride close enough to notice him. As the horse carried the red giant up one last slope bringing Luck fully into the man's view, the Elf almost changed his mind and bolted. But desperation overrode his fear, and he held his ground.

"Hail, stranger," Luck called out. "May I speak with you for a moment?"

"By the Under!" The startled rider jerked his mount to a halt and stared in awe at the tiny creature in the roadway calling out to him. His hand grabbed over his shoulder and touched the hilt of his sword, but he did not draw the blade. After a moment, he relaxed his grip and allowed his hand to fall back to his thigh. "What manner of demon is calling me? Am I truly seeing what I think I'm seeing? By the Fiery Wall, I believe there is an Elf in my roadway. An Elf!"

"May I speak with you, sir?" Luck said again.

"Of course, wee one. Of course," laughed the man. "Speak as you please and I will listen to every word. Forgive my manners, but your presence has thrown me. I have heard of Elves, but never thought in my lifetime to actually see one. Wait one minute." The soldier smoothly dismounted his horse and moved closer to Luck. He then sat down cross-legged in the roadway with his hands resting on his knees to show no he had no ill intent. "Now, please come and say what you wish. No harm will come to you by my hand, and I hope your intentions are as honorable."

The idea that this massive human thought for a moment Luck might be any kind of a threat startled the Elf. If the two stood side by side, he would barely reach the man's belt. But so there could be absolutely no misunderstandings, he slipped his bow and quiver off of his shoulder and laid them in the road at his feet. "I offer no threat to you, sir. I merely must ask a favor. It is not a simple one, but I desperately need your assistance and I pray you will hear me out completely."

"Not one man in a thousand can claim he had a conversation with an Elf. You may rest assured I will remain to hear every word. But first let me say, my name is Roddin of Ulmstead. Friends call me Red Roddin for obvious reasons. May I ask by what name you are called?"

"Yes, certainly," stammered Luck apologetically. "I am Luck Browntupp, of Dalgaffar. Thank you for the kindness of your audience, and I sincerely hope you are the answer to my quest. I am here because about half a year ago Ogrus mysteriously began to journey out of their mountain home to attack my village…." Luck recounted everything he could recall, from the attacks and his father's death, to his odd conversation with Olggott and the reason for his journey. He concluded with his discovery of the red man astride a red horse and his belief that the soldier might be the Red he must join to stop the Ogrus. "Now I have told you my story, I must ask: Will you help me?"

"That is quite a story," said Roddin, scratching at the wild mat of red hair on his face. "And if it is true, it still leaves some question as to whether or not I am actually this 'Red' of which your Elder spoke. But, in answer to your question, let me tell you my story of how I came to be out on this road. It is very short and simple. I love a woman who I know also loves me. However, her father believes me to be beneath her and therefore not fit to marry. I have taken to the road in hopes

of gaining glory and wealth with which to prove I am worthy of her. As yet, I have found hardships aplenty but nothing of value to carry back to my beloved Leilani. The color of my garb – which you have found so interesting – is in tribute to my love. Her favorite color is red, and so everything I wear or carry must be red in honor of her. My sword is the only exception to this, and it too has on occasion run bright with red.

"So now an Elf has come to me asking if I will join him on a quest against Ogrus attacking his people. A quest likely to make my name ring in history, for how many men can claim to have stood side by side with Elves in battle? You are truly an answer to my prayers and I would be the greatest of fools to turn you away. So my answer is yes. I will travel with you and help you as I can. But if I might ask just one question of an indelicate nature. I assure you I mean no disrespect or harm by it."

Luck was almost dancing with excitement at Roddin's agreement to join him, and he would have granted the red soldier his left arm if asked right at that moment. "Ask. And I will answer any question you may have."

Roddin cleared his throat, appearing almost embarrassed at having to ask his question. "When this adventure has ended, might there be the slightest chance … could it be possible … can I expect any payment?"

The question stunned Luck. Not because he was surprised by it, but because he had not thought of it himself. "Yes. We can offer payment. Many of the Elves in Dalgaffar mine gemstones out of the base of the mountains. The gems are cut, polished, and used for jewelry or other personal display. They are quite beautiful, but we do not generally consider them to be of any value other than as decoration. I understand that Humans, however, greatly value these stones as wealth. When we return to Dalgaffar, I can assure you that you will receive as many as you can carry away. I only ask that you please never say where they came from. I fear that if the wrong Humans ever learned of this they would plunder my poor village more thoroughly than the Ogrus ever could. Is this acceptable?"

Now Roddin looked ready to dance. "Luck is surely your name, for you have turned mine decidedly for the better." The huge man lumbered to his feet and offered Luck a deep courtly bow. "I am your faithful servant for as long as you require my services."

Roddin stepped back to his horse and grabbed the reins, preparing to mount. "You will be wanting to continue west I presume. I have just come from that direction and there is very little of interest. The nearest settlement is still three days journey by horseback." The man paused with one foot in a stirrup and turned his head toward Luck. "I have one more question for you, Luck. I notice you carry a bow. How skilled are you with it?"

"There are many better than I am, but I am considered a fair shot."

"And how are you at hunting?"

"Again, fair." Luck peered up at Roddin, wondering where the man was going with these questions.

"My rations are growing low, and my sword is all but useless for hunting," he said.

"You are more than welcome to any provisions I carry," offered Luck, indicating the pack on his back.

Roddin laughed. "I could eat everything you carry including the pack itself and still be hungry. Thank you deeply for the offer, but I am tired of travel rations regardless. I was hoping, truthfully, that you might be able to bring down some fresh meat. It would be a refreshing break."

"Do you like hare? There is a nice fat one just a few yards away. I am sure I could bring it

down from here."

Roddin looked around and saw nothing but tall grass and brown spiny shrubs. "Where is it? I do not see it."

"There." Luck pointed to his left at a small clump of turned up ground under a bush. A rabbit sat quietly in the shade, patiently waiting for the two travelers to be on their way so he could resume feeding or running or whatever rabbits do when they are not hiding.

"Where? I still do not see a rabbit."

"Are all Humans so blind?" asked Luck, exasperated.

"I had always considered my eyesight quite keen," responded Roddin. "But I suppose compared to yours, yes, all Humans are blind."

Luck picked up his bow and quiver from the ground. He slung the quiver over his shoulder and removed one arrow. With a practiced motion he nocked the arrow, drew the bow to full extension and released. The arrow flew true and pierced the rabbit through the heart, pinning it to the ground before it could even think to flee.

"Bad break. Looks like you lost your arrow," said Roddin, gazing toward where he had seen the bolt disappear.

Luck shook his head, muttering disparagingly about the weakness of Human eyesight, and tramped into the grass to claim his kill. As he parted the grass, he flushed a hiding grouse from her nest. Without thinking he drew a second arrow and speared her out of the sky as she launched herself to escape. Roddin saw this shot clearly and whistled his appreciating at the Elf's marksmanship.

Luck returned with both trophies and handed them to Roddin. He carefully wiped his arrows clean and returned them to the quiver. "Is that enough? I'm sure I can find more if you think you need it."

"No, wee one," said Roddin smiling broadly through his thick red beard. He tied the two animals together and hung them from his saddlebags. "Let us ride. In but a short while we can set camp in the lee of the hills. And then we eat."

The Human giant, upon choosing their campsite, had immediately set about cleaning and preparing their meal while Luck built a fire. It took only a moment before the rabbit and grouse were both spitted and hung over the flames to cook. Before long, the smells of roasting meat had caused stomachs to growl and mouths to water in anticipation. When the animals were deemed done, Luck claimed one hind leg of the hare, and Roddin had unashamedly devoured the rest. Both man and Elf now relaxed with happily stretched bellies as the sun slowly disappeared behind the hills in which they took shelter.

Roddin leaned back with the lively crackling fire in front of him and belched contentedly. With a sleeve he wiped at the grease in his beard, but succeeded only in spreading it further across his face. He did not seem to mind. Luck sat somewhat more gingerly than did Roddin. He had found the ride by horseback decidedly unpleasant, as the huge animal's back was far too wide for him to comfortably straddle. He had been forced to sit sideways across the horse and cling to the saddle and Roddin for dear life, and the constant jarring gait of the beast had left Luck's poor backside bruised and sore. Leaning against the support of a small tree, he winced slightly and shifted, trying to find a more comfortable position in which to recline.

"Roddin, while I appreciate the ability of your animal to cover quite a bit of ground very quickly, I think that in the morning I shall walk. I know of no reason to hurry in our travels, and I

think if I ever wish to be so thoroughly battered again, I shall just turn myself over to an Ogru."

Roddin chuckled. "I see you did not enjoy your first time on a horse. Well, I suppose neither would I if the horse were twenty feet tall and six feet wide. If we are to spend much time together, we must fashion a saddle that will permit you a more comfortable ride. Mayhap, tomorrow before we set out I can…."

"Hsst!" whispered Luck urgently. "Quiet! Do you hear that?"

Roddin listened carefully for several moments then shook his head. "No. I hear nothing save the fire and us."

"It sounds like a woman crying. I think it is coming from that direction." Luck pointed off through the trees to the south.

"I'm sorry, little friend. I do not hear it. But then, I must assume that Humans are as deaf as they are blind around such as you."

Luck rose to his feet, grimacing at the stiffness in his limbs, and moved carefully towards the source of the noise. Roddin, not wanting to be left behind, followed a few paces back, trying to move quietly so as not to drown out whatever the Elf was hearing. The two crept stealthily through the woods for several minutes, Luck pausing periodically to be sure he still moved in the right direction, when they came to an unexpected break in the trees opening out on a beautiful green glade. Multi-colored flowers spotted the entire stretch of green, and a winding silver stream trickled through the middle from tree line to tree line. On the far side of the stream a glowing pinpoint of golden light flickered in and out of the grass. The tiny light seemed to also be the source of the noise Luck had been tracking. Roddin now heard it for the first time, and it did indeed sound like a woman weeping.

"No. Impossible," whispered Luck. "It's a Faery!"

"Where? The light?" asked Roddin.

"I have heard of Faeries, but I never thought they actually existed," continued Luck with awe in his voice.

Roddin looked at Luck strangely for a minute, then his shoulders began to shake and his eyes teared as he tried to suppress a great burst of laughter.

"What's so funny," Luck asked, confused.

After a moment, when he could control his fit long enough to speak, Roddin said, "I'm sorry. I guess you can not see the beautiful humor of hearing an Elf expressing his disbelief in Faeries." The laughter caught the man up again and he was unable to completely smother a snort of mirth. The light in the glade abruptly blinked out.

"Forgive me," said Roddin, sobering quickly. "She must have heard me. Now she is gone."

"No, not gone," corrected Luck. "Hiding. If she had fled we would have seen the light move out of the glade. Faeries are masters of illusion and she has simply cloaked herself with the image of something else. Come. I think we can still find her."

Luck led Roddin into the glade. They moved quickly past the stream, into the area where they had last seen and heard the Faery, but try as they might they could not locate her. All Luck could see around him was grass, brush, and various types of flowers.

"She must be hidden very well," commented Roddin.

"Yes, she must," said Luck, distracted by something slightly odd. He moved to a large patch of brush populated with tiny purple blooms. Growing up from the middle of that living field of velvet stood one lustrous yellow flower perched upon a shimmering golden stem. On a hunch, Luck moved to grasp the bright yellow blossom. As he touched the stem, it suddenly twisted away from

his hand, squeaking out a startled, "Oh!"

Luck took a step back and addressed the odd flower. "We don't mean you any harm. I only came because I heard you crying and I wanted to try and help. Is there anything we can do for you?"

Luck received no response. He stated the question again, and again was rewarded with only silence. Just as he was beginning to feel foolish for attempting to draw a plant into conversation, the golden flower blurred and shimmered as though being viewed through a sheet of flowing water. When the vision cleared, the flower had vanished. In its place remained a small winged figure. Long white hair draped down across her body, offering the only concealment of her tiny form. On a second glance, Luck saw that while feminine in figure, she – or rather it – was completely neutral of gender. Standing fully one foot shorter than Luck, the ethereal creature gazed up at him with huge yellow eyes. Her skin – for Luck continued to think of the Faery as she despite evidence to the contrary – was the color of gold from head to foot, and fragile wings of yellow gossamer graced the slender back.

While the thought raged through Luck's head, it was Roddin who voiced the obvious. "Yellow," he whispered in awe. "Luck, I think this is the Yellow you were supposed to find."

Luck nodded at Roddin's statement and addressed the figure before him. "Faery, I am sure I heard you crying. Is there any service that we may render?"

The yellow Faery shook her lovely head. She spoke in a melodious voice that reminded Luck of glass chimes. "I do not know if you can help me, Elf. I do not know if anyone can help me. And I am not sure why you wish to help. Is there something you want of me in return for your aid?"

Luck sighed. He considered lying to the Faery and suggesting he wished only to help and then be on his way, but something inside him told him if he wanted to gain her trust he must be completely truthful. So he admitted that yes, he did need something from her. Luck recounted the same story he had told Roddin earlier that day, finishing with his belief that she might be the 'Yellow' Olggott had spoken of. "Can you help me? Would you be willing to come with me to Dalgaffar?"

The Faery shook her head sadly causing her hair to dance around her body like a halo of white light. "I am sorry. I cannot. Even if I wished to go with you, I am trapped here in this glade until I find what I lost."

"Maybe we can help you find whatever it is," suggested Luck. "What did you lose?"

"My soul," answered the Faery.

Luck blinked in surprise. He had been prepared for almost any answer except this one. Did Faeries have souls, he wondered. And if so, how would one be lost? As he reeled from the implications of her answer, it was again Roddin who freely spoke his thoughts.

"How does one lose a soul, Faery? And how would we help find it?"

"The explanation is rather lengthy, human. Do you have time to hear it?"

"We have naught but time, fair creature. But first I think introductions are in order. I am Roddin of Ulmstead. Friends call me Red Roddin, or simply Roddin." He bowed with a flourish to the delighted Faery. "My traveling companion with the sad story is Luck Browntupp. And you are…?"

"I do not have a name to give you. Faeries do not need them. But if you wish to have some title for me, perhaps 'Yellow' will be sufficient given your friend's present quest."

Roddin bowed again. "Then greetings to you, Yellow. It is a great pleasure to meet you. Now, please share your story, and mayhap we can be of some assistance after all."

Looking sadly about the glade as though seeking where to properly begin her explanation, Yellow paused, then finally nodded. "Very well. My story is perhaps slightly odd, for most Faeries do not have souls with which to concern themselves. A Faery soul is passed down within a family from parent to first child. It is not truly a soul as Humans or Elves think of it, for there is no afterlife for a Faery. It is, instead a collection, if you will, of memories, thoughts, and emotions of all its prior possessors.

"Most Faeries have no memory of the past or concern for the future. They live day-to-day, and moment-to-moment. Perfectly content to consider nothing but what is currently pleasurable. When a Faery possesses a soul, she has a true sense of self and a greater understanding of the world around her. I am intimately familiar with the thoughts and dreams of my ancestors and I perceive the world around me much more fully since my mother passed her soul to me. I can appreciate beauty, feel empathy for another's loss or pain, I can even love. But a soul has a dark side as well. I have come to know fear, sadness, and longing. And I understand my own mortality. Faeries live a very long time, but even we will die eventually. Not the most comforting of thoughts, but this knowledge is part of the price I pay for having a soul.

"In short, you, Human, would call a Faery soul a sense of humanity. You, Elf, would call it a heart. Regardless of your name for it, my soul is what makes me unique among Faeries and all other creatures. Without it I will slowly revert to an empty-headed, unfeeling creature with no thought for anything but my own pleasure. It was not so terrible before I learned what life could be with a soul, but now I am afraid to become that mindless being again."

Roddin nodded his great shaggy head in sympathy for the Faery's loss. "How did you lose your soul, Yellow? And how can we help you find it?"

A tear trickled from one yellow eye and down her exquisite golden cheek. "Losing my soul was my own fault. The only way to lose a soul, or pass it to another, is to wish it away. I lost it because I felt sorry for myself. This morning I sat and watched a glorious sunrise by a nearby pond. I commented to a friend how lovely I thought the light looked reflected off the water, and she laughed. She said, 'it's just a sunrise,' and 'you're always looking at dumb things and acting silly.' Several others heard her comments and they began to taunt me. They called me names and laughed cruelly at me.

"I ran away from them and came here. I sat next to this stream and wished I were not so different from all the other Faeries. I wished I had no soul."

"So now, it is gone," finished Luck. "Wished away."

"Yes," Yellow agreed. "As soon as I felt it leave, I knew I made a mistake and I wanted it back. I have been searching for it ever since. It must be around here somewhere, but it is very hard to find."

Roddin smiled reassuringly to the unhappy Faery. "We will find it for you," he said. "What does it look like?"

"It looks like nothing. It is invisible."

"Then you should be able to see it," exclaimed Luck. "I thought Faeries could see through any illusion and find the reality beneath."

"For someone who does not believe in Faeries, he certainly seems to think he knows a great deal about them." Roddin muttered good-naturedly under his breath.

"We can," agreed Yellow. "However, the soul is not cloaked in illusion. It truly is invisible. Just like the air around us. I see it no more clearly than do you."

"Then how do you ever hope to find it?" asked Luck, shaking his head sadly.

"It can be touched. It is solid, but it is also tiny. Only about the size of a fist…."

"Would that be my fist, or yours?" asked Roddin, holding up one massive calloused hand.

Yellow giggled. Her laughter sounded like lively music and Luck was immediately grateful to Roddin for lifting the poor Faery's mood.

"Oh dear," said Yellow, still smiling. "My fist, gentle giant. If my soul were as large as your hand I should have found it long ago."

Luck glanced around the glade. While the three new companions had been sharing stories of misfortune, full darkness had claimed the small clearing and only the light from a slivered moon offered any illumination. "It is too dark now to search effectively," he said. "I think we should get some sleep, then tomorrow at first light we will help you find your soul, Yellow." Luck hesitated a moment, then added, "Yellow, I will help you search regardless of your answer, but I must ask: When you find your soul, will you come with me to Dalgaffar?"

"Luck, I answer you sincerely when I tell you, if you find my soul I will follow you through The Under, to the Fiery Wall itself."

True to his word, Luck awoke to the first touch of sunlight upon the sheltered glade. While the trio slept, dew had covered everything upon the ground including their dozing forms, and Luck now found himself covered by cold wet garments. He shivered and rose to his feet, stomping and flapping his arms against his body to generate some warmth and perhaps dry his clothing somewhat. He soon found his efforts to be of little aid, providing only minimally improved personal comfort. As he floundered about the campsite, the sun glinted and flashed off of millions of beads of moisture dotting the grass and plants, causing a dazzling display of light. Each movement set off a new array of silent fireworks and sent a hundred new rainbows flying across the field. But Luck's own discomfort kept him from noticing the sun's spectacular morning performance. When his calisthenics failed to improve his mood, he grumbled about the dismal conditions of sleeping out of doors and stepped behind a concealing bush to relieve the pressure his bladder had built up over night.

Slightly more comfortable afterwards, he wandered down to the stream for a drink and a quick wash. Luck knelt beside the running rivulet and began to splash his face, leaving his shirt on. Since it was already wet, a little more water could not possibly hurt it. Besides, he figured his clothing needed washing as badly as he did, perhaps worse. As he leaned over the cool brook, letting the water run from his wet hair and dripping chin, a flash of brilliant light caught the corner of his eye from a nearby bank of grass. He would have ignored the distraction as he had the earlier display, but something about it nagged at him. He rocked back and forth on his knees a few times, trying to encourage a second glimpse of the phenomenon, and just as he decided he was being silly, the light rewarded him with another peek. A blinding sapphire spark ignited once more from the grass. This time he knew why he had been unable to simply disregard this particular reflection: the light was blue!

Luck rushed over to the patch of grass from which the light had come and fell down beside it. He turned his head this way and that, looking at the foliage from all angles trying to encourage another flash, but though he moved frantically from side to side, he could not make the blue glimmer reappear. He ran his hands slowly through the grass, parting it and allowing more sunlight to touch what might be hidden inside, but again his efforts remained unrewarded. Luck began to grow desperate. He had come so close; he could not lose it now when he knelt right on top of it. Frantically, he tore clumps of the grass out by the handful, tossing it aside as he searched. Then

something he could not see bumped the back of his hand. He felt it touch him then heard a slight click as the object struck a rock and skittered toward the running stream. The sun touched the dew-dampened item once again as it rolled. Luck saw a glorious blue ball of light moving fast in the direction of the water. He knew if he allowed it to fall in, all hope of finding it again would be forever gone. Without pausing to consider his actions, Luck dove at the water to intercept the rolling ball of light. He had time for only one attempt, and if he missed….

As Luck's hand neared the flashing object, he blocked the sunlight from its surface and the elusive ball once more disappeared. He cried out in despair, and with no other option, he closed his fist over where he believed it must be. For a moment Luck lay sprawled out on the mud and wet gravel of the stream bank, waiting for the small splash that would tell him he had failed. Failed to find the Faery's soul. Failed to find help. Failed to save his village. But the sound never came.

Not daring to believe his own fortune, he squeezed his fist tighter. His fingers met resistance. A slick glassy surface slid against his palm, pulsing softly and generating warmth. Holding his hand to his face, he would have sworn his fingers had wrapped around nothing, but the heat and smooth touch told him undeniably he had captured the elusive invisible ball.

Luck ran back to his sleeping companions, calling out to wake them. He slipped and fell on a patch of wet grass as he ran, jolting his chin and knocking the wind out of himself, but he refused to use his hands to cushion his fall, fearing he might drop the object he held and be forced to begin the search all over again. So, panting and slightly bruised, he finally reached the campsite.

"Yellow, I found it!" he shouted holding his fist up in triumph.

The Faery woke immediately and rushed to Luck's side. "My soul? You found it? But how? Where?"

"Never mind how. I have it and that is all that matters."

"Well, let's see it then," said Roddin, sitting up and rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "What does a Faery soul look like?"

Luck held out his hand and opened it. His palm appeared empty. For a moment he feared he had lost it after all, but the pulsing warmth still beating strongly against his skin reassured him of its continued presence. Yellow reached out and closed her fingers around the empty space over Luck's outstretched hand.

"Are you two playing a game?" asked Roddin, looking slightly cross. "I see nothing at all, yet you two act as though you were handling the most precious gem ever mined."

"No game, gentle giant," assured Yellow. "Luck has found what I would indeed call the most precious gem I shall ever hope to hold." Yellow plucked the Faery soul from Luck's hand and held it tightly to her breast. "I wish you mine once more," she said. Then with a smile that lit the entire glade and laughter that filled the forest around them, Yellow threw her arms about Luck and squeezed him.

"I am glad I could help you find your soul, Yellow," said Luck, immensely pleased with both the results of his search and the hug. "But, now that you have it again…."

Yellow released him and placed a small hand to his mouth. "The promise I made last night was not lightly made. I will go with you. Though I do not understand what one Faery and one Human can do against an hundred Ogrus, I will offer what assistance I can."

"Thank you," said Luck, deeply grateful. "Then if I am to understand Elder Olggott correctly, I have joined Yellow and Red and it is time to return home.

The journey back to Dalgaffar took only two days and nights on horseback. Though the ride

left his backside even more bruised and sore than previously, Luck did not wish to waste any time now that his quest had come so close to completion. On the morning of the third day, Luck, Roddin and Yellow rode into the all but deserted streets of Luck's village. He had been gone less than a fortnight, yet in that time many of the residents of Dalgaffar had moved south to other Elf villages, hoping they would be safe further away from the Ogrus' mountains. The Elves that remained believed the Ogrus would pursue wherever they fled, and preferred to face the threat in their own homes rather than among strangers.

Among those that remained, a hardy few moved about the thinly populated market street trying to maintain a normal daily routine. Arguments broke out among store owners and purchasers just as always, but the voices lacked the usual vigor of good haggling, and the disputes stayed muted as though too much noise might draw the Ogrus back down upon them. The babble died down completely as all eyes were drawn to the huge red Human and tiny Faery marching past. Luck began to feel all but invisible perched high atop Roddin's warhorse.

Luck and his party marched directly to the home of Dallen Olggott and pounded firmly on the wooden door. Olggott answered immediately, as though he had been expecting their arrival.

"Come in, Luck Browntupp, and bring your companions. I am eager to speak with them."

"Forgive me, Elder," said Roddin respectfully of the wizened old Elf. "I do not believe I shall fit in your home. May we speak out here?"

"Nonsense," assured Olggott. "Once you are seated, you will fit just fine. Please watch your head on the way in."

Surprisingly, Roddin did find himself comfortably seated in the large sturdy couch inside. Luck and Yellow found chairs and arranged them to either side of Roddin, while Olggott, having given up his couch, sat in a stiff-looking wooden rocking chair.

"I see you have found what you sought," stated Olggott to Luck when they all had settled in. "Or rather, who you sought. I did not realize Red and Yellow would be Human and Faery, but there was a great deal about you that I could not clearly see."

"And speaking of seeing, now that we are all here, what are we supposed to do?"

Olggott paused and looked briefly at each of the three pairs of eyes staring back at him. After a long moment, he dropped his gaze. "I do not know."

Luck felt his mouth drop open in disbelief. This could not be happening. Against all logic he had left his home and pursued Olggott's ridiculous quest. Against all reasonable possibility he had actually found and joined yellow and red. Luck had done everything he was supposed to do, everything Olggott had asked. But now when it was time for the old Elf to supply the final piece of the puzzle that would rid the village of the Ogrus, he did not have it. Luck felt a dark ache of helplessness twist inside of him. It was not fair. It was not right. "You don't know?" he said softly. Then again, as the ache turned to anger inside him, he said with more force, "You don't know? I did exactly as you said and brought back 'Red' and 'Yellow' to save Dalgaffar. And when I bring them to you to find out what to do next, you tell me you don't know? Well, I'm tired of not knowing. I want an answer!"

Roddin reached out a massive hand and laid it on Luck's shoulder, calming the angry Elf and easing him back into his chair. "Let him talk, Luck. He brought us this far. Let us hear what there is to hear."

"Thank you, Human, but Luck is right this time," apologized Olggott. "I have absolutely no idea what you are supposed to do next. All I can suggest to you is to wait. Wait for the next Ogrus attack and see what we shall see."

"Is that a prophecy?" asked Luck, sneering.

"It is a suggestion. If you have a better one, young buck, I will gladly listen to it."

In response, Luck stood up once more and, without a word, walked out of the house. Roddin and Yellow, uttering apologies and polite comments, followed him out. With nothing better in mind, Luck went home.

The small Browntupp house stood empty. Inside, he found a note with his name on it lying on the kitchen table. With Luck's father dead and her only son gone away, his mother had moved south to a nearby village to stay with relatives. She took Luck's younger sister with her, leaving the house solely to him should he ever return. He could stay with the house or leave as he saw fit, but she expressed the keen desire that he might join them if he were able. Luck carefully folded the note and slipped it under his belt. Perhaps he would join them. But not yet.

Luck invited his new friends into his home. He offered the Human and Faery food from his larder and showed them where they could sleep at night. Then they waited.

They waited for just over a fortnight before the Ogrus struck again. Early in the morning, a great blood-chilling howl sounded from the mountains as the beasts raided yet again. By the dozens, the lumbering hairy creatures fell at Elf homes and their denizens with sharp teeth and wicked claws. Luck witnessed the initial charge and called out to his companions still inside the house. Roddin burst through the door immediately with Yellow fast behind.

"There they are," said Luck pointing. "What are we to do to stop a hundred rampaging monsters?"

Yellow gazed around her in wonder and surprise. A smile grew on her delicate face and soon she began to laugh.

"I fail to see humor in this, Yellow," said Luck tightly through gritted teeth.

"You apparently fail to see quite a bit, Elf," retorted Yellow. Then pointing, "Look closely at the Ogrus tearing at that house. What damage are they doing?"

Luck watched for a moment. "They are tearing at thatch and breaking a wall."

"Are they?"

Luck looked more closely, and noticed that even as the Ogrus tore at the building, tossing wood and thatch about in the air, the house itself remained perfectly intact. "I do not understand. The house looks untouched."

"Illusion, Luck," said Yellow simply. "You are not being attacked by a hundred Ogrus. There is only one. He is invisible to your eyes and he is the one who does all the real damage. The others are merely visions to distract and frighten. No wonder your Elder wanted a Faery here. To see through the illusion to the real threat."

"One Ogru?" asked Luck dismayed. "If that is true, then Roddin, I believe I know why you are here as well."

"I agree," said the giant, drawing his sword. "Yellow, can you hide from the Ogru's sight? I do not want him to know that his illusion has been discovered."

"Of course," she replied.

"Good. Then point me to a beast closest to the real threat, and tell me when I am close enough to strike him."

Roddin strode into the illusory carnage with a now invisible Faery at his side. Luck could only stay behind and watch helplessly.

"What does the Ogru wear?" asked Roddin.

"Wear? I do not understand you."

"Does he have armor? I will have only one cut before he is aware we can see through his disguise, and I do not want my blade turned aside by a shield or weapon."

"Oh," said Yellow, as understanding dawned. "No. He wears nothing but the matted stinking fur on his body. And he carries no weapons but his teeth and claws, though they do seem formidable."

Roddin confronted an illusory beast in front of him, slashing his sword through the creature harmlessly. When it retaliated he backed away from the slashing claws, letting his retreat lead him closer to where Yellow told him the true enemy stood.

"He has noticed you," Yellow warned. "He is coming closer."

"Let him come. Where is his neck?"

"His neck is the same height as the top of your head."

"Good. Tell me when he is two arms lengths away," said Roddin, taking another half-hearted swing at the harmless creature in front of him.

"He is directly behind you. Moving slowly. He respects your sword, and well he should. Closer … closer. Now, Human!"

Roddin took one half step back then pivoted full around, bringing his sword with him in a deadly arc. As he swung his blade through what appeared to be empty air, he felt a moment of resistance as the weapon struck home. Roddin did not see the Ogru fall, but he knew the creature had been dealt a deathblow when he found himself standing in a village suddenly absent its attacking horde. The illusory army had dissipated with the death of its creator.

"Aha!" called out the once again visible Faery. She bent down and grasped at nothing Roddin could immediately see. When she stood, she held a small silver amulet, and at her feet laid the decapitated form of the dead Ogru. She held the charm up to Roddin. "Faery wrought. I doubt it was a gift, and I fear for the fate of the Faery he took this from. This is how he created his attacking horde and kept himself hidden from view. Do you wish to take this, Roddin? It is yours by right."

"No, Yellow. Thank you, but I think it should remain with you."

Yellow nodded and closed her tiny fist around the amulet. Molten slag ran from her hand and pooled on the ground at her feet, hissing and charring the dried grass where it fell. "This shall cause no more mischief."

"Is it over?" called out Luck excitedly, running towards the victorious pair. "Did you get him?"

"It is over," confirmed Roddin, nodding toward the headless Ogru.

Luck stared at the motionless body, then let out a whoop of triumph. "Yellow," he cried. "How can I ever repay you for your help?"

"I think you misunderstand the nature of our agreement, Elf. It is I who am repaying you for finding my soul. We are even as of this moment."

"Thank you," he said sincerely, bowing his head. "And as for you, Red Roddin. Tomorrow you leave with as much wealth as your poor horse can carry." Luck shook his head bemusedly. "I still can not believe that senile old Nostri was right the whole time."

Roddin clapped Luck across the back with one broad hand. "Maybe you should tell him that. But I would leave out the 'senile' part."

**THE END**

Continued from page 11

She wore a long white lab coat. The kind that all scientists wear while they are attempting to invent a new atomic weapon or rebuild Frankenstein's monster. Only she complemented hers with a light blue cloth cap, designed to help keep her hair out of her way as she leans over circuit boards and voltmeters.

As she stepped out, she pulled off her cap and a light brown ponytail fell down over her shoulder. Her smile was warm as she laughed. "Nine?" She shook her head slightly, briefly dropping her gaze to the floor and then back up to me. "I did it again, didn't I?'

"Yes," I said, turning to my right and pulling my own lab coat off its hook. "Yes you did. Again. Let me ask you." I smiled, "If you're so smart, such a whiz with electronics, why can't you manage to get the time of day down?"

"Well," she smiled, holding her arm out, showing me the watch that I had given her for her birthday only two months before. "They say that there is no time like the present. And since I already have this present from you, there's no reason to look at the time."

"You know," I responded, stepping over to the main computer, "they also say that it's the thought that counts. And I thought that you could count on a good timepiece."

"Now we're arguing semantics," she replied, and it was left at that.

I took a stool in front of the main computer and quickly typed in my password. I then turned to face Kathryn again as she walked over to the hooks and hung up her cap. "Did you finish?" I asked. "I'm sorry I couldn't stay any longer last night to help out, but some of us can't just put off sleep indefinitely."

"That's okay." She responded over her shoulder as she slowly wove her way through the tables toward the door at the back of the room. "It actually went a lot faster after you left. Though, now that I know it's already nine, maybe it wasn't really that much faster after all. Just fewer things happening to measure time against."

I nodded my head toward the clean-room. "What were you working on in there, then?"

Kathryn turned and looked at me with half squinted eyes through her glasses, as if she was trying hard to understand just exactly what I was referring to. Finally it seemed to dawn on her. "Oh," she said. "I was just testing some new peripherals for Andie."

"Oh, that brings up a more important question," I said, getting up from my seat and weaving through the tables to get to the back door just after her. "How is Andie doing?"

"Well," she began, pulling her security card out of her lab coat pocket, "it's really hard to say at this point. I mean the H.A.S. is brand new and doesn't have a large amount of data to process yet. Andie had a bit of an…accident last night after it was installed."

"An accident?"

"Yes," she said, swiping her card through the reader. "Over there in the corner." As the large metal door slowly opened outward, she motioned toward the corner of the room opposite the clean-room. There was a small pile of papers strewn about at the end of one of the tables, and the metal corner of the table top was noticeably bent downward.

"Andie did that?"

"Yes," she replied, matter-of-factly. Then she stepped into the room.

I turned back around and followed her into the smaller room where Andie stayed. He was standing in the center of the room staring at us, waiting as he always did. On his right shoulder, I could see his shirtsleeve was torn quite badly. I could also see that the tear continued on into his shoulder and upper arm forming a good-sized gash in the shoulder.

"It must have been quite an impact. The outer skin simply pulled away, exposing the muscle

beneath. And you just left it like that?" I asked.

"Well," she began to respond, "you're better at this sort of thing than I am." And she stepped over to a large computer with a dentist-style diagnostic chair next to it.

"Good morning, Kathryn," Andie said, tilting only his head in her direction. "Did the night pass well?"

"Well enough, I hear," she responded, casting a sideways glance in my direction.

"And Jeff," he continued, fixing his gaze on me. "How did the night pass for Jeff?"

"Chronologically as always," I smiled, stepping over to the diagnostic chair. I motioned for Andie to sit. "How was your night?"

Andie turned his hips, wobbling slightly, and then stepped toward the chair, with a rather awkward stagger. "Andie fell down," he replied. "Andie is damaged." He took his seat and laid back. It had taken us days just to teach him to do that simple movement.

"That's okay, Andie," I consoled, smiling. "That's part of learning." I reached down at the bottom of his tee shirt and grabbed it. "Up." Andie lifted his hands exactly straight up and brought his back away from the chair as I whipped his shirt off to have a better look at his gash. Once the shirt was off, he lay back again and I began to examine his right arm and shoulder.

It was always a little disconcerting to look at Andie with his shirt off. It was like looking in the mirror. He had the same muscular build as I, even down to the dark birthmark that stuck out from his left side, midway down his torso. I had gotten used to the face, as it was a mixture of features from the two of us, Kathryn and me. And it was still uniquely his. Though I often had to laugh at the combination of Kathryn's small, pointed nose and my rather square chin. But I didn't have to see the rest of his body all day and it was still going to take a little while to get used to it.

"Hmm. It doesn't look too bad. At least it didn't damage his muscle fibers. This won't take long at all."

I turned to a small table behind me and grabbed a tube of foam-rubber repair solution. I came back around and Andie was already holding the tear open with his left hand, exposing a large bundle of alloy fibers and wiring beneath. I looked at him in amazement.

Andie looked puzzled at my expression. "Is this not what Jeff wants? Is Andie not helping?"

"Oh…it's not that," I stuttered. "But I didn't ask you to do anything to help me. Why did you think that I would want your help?"

"People help people," Andie stated. "Like how Jeff helps Kathryn. It is easier to cover the torn surface if the tear is held open. Is Andie wrong?"

I smiled at him. "No, Andie. Andie is not wrong. I just didn't expect you to come up with that all by yourself." I looked across the chair at Kathryn. She just beamed back at me with pleasure.

I applied the adhesive, closed the wound and brought out a small texturing brush to blend the mend with the rest of the molded exterior. A pretty good match if I do say so myself. Since then, I've often looked to see if I could find where exactly the tear had been. But it's really not worth the time it takes. After I was done with his arm, Andie got up out of the chair and waited, motionless.

Kathryn motioned for me to follow her back to the main lab.

"How did it happen?" I asked as we went through the doorway.

"He tripped," she responded, a smile spreading across her face, as if remembering a funny joke. "He tripped over his own feet."

"Tripped? But he doesn't trip. I mean, he never has before. Are you sure his H.A.S. program is working properly?"

"Well, like I said," she replied. "It is still quite new. I mean, we only finished writing it last

night. We have to give it some time to even itself out. That's the whole point of the H.A.S., isn't it?"

"Well, yes. But that isn't a very encouraging beginning. Don't you agree?"

Kathryn just smiled and went back to the hooks to grab her clean-room cap. As she did, I turned to face the doorway that we had just exited. Andie stood in the middle of his room, staring at me with unblinking eyes.

"C'mon, Andie," I said, motioning for him to follow me.

Slowly, Andie stepped forward, obviously a little unstable on his feet. "Andie has a question for Jeff," Andie said. "What is the 'H.A.S. program' that Jeff and Kathryn mentioned?"

Andie had never asked a question before. And there were many things that he did not yet understand. I wasn't sure what to make of it at first. But, as I stared into his peering face, it occurred to me that I still hadn't given him an answer.

"Oh," I stumbled. "Uh, the H.A.S. is simply a program that we wrote to help you better mimic human actions. It will hopefully help you to seem more real to others."

"Is Andie not real?" he asked.

"No. I mean, yes," I began, making a very dismal attempt to explain. "I mean…uh, I don't mean that you aren't real. Of course you are. You're standing right in front of me. But you aren't…uh. The H.A.S. will help you seem more—" What was the word that I wanted? Was it 'alive'? 'Sentient'? what in fact were we trying to accomplish here?

"—human," I finally said, thinking that that would sufficiently answer his curiosity. I began to turn around and head back to the main computer with Andie.

"Why?" he asked.

"Why what?" I asked, not even turning back to face him. I could hear his heavy footsteps getting quieter behind me, most likely because he was beginning to mimic my own limping footfalls.

"Why did Jeff and Kathryn write the H.A.S. program?"

I thought that I had just answered that question: To help Andie mimic human motion. What else did he need to know?

From within the clean-room, Kathryn called out, "Because other people seemed to be uncomfortable with your motions."

"Why?" he asked turning his head toward the clean-room.

Now, I understood. He wasn't asking what the program did. He wanted to know why we felt he needed to act more human. I sat at my stool in front of the main computer and turned to face him.

"You see, Andie," I began. "We went to great efforts to show that an android could be made to look human. That artificial beings didn't need to be large and clunky. The alloy fibers that we developed for your muscles helped us to achieve that. They contract to electrical impulses, just like muscle. So we were able to make a being that had ten times the strength of an average man, without making him look like Robbie the Robot. We developed your skin to appear like normal skin until close inspection. We put many details into your appearance. But when we presented you to the university yesterday, all of that seemed to work against us. You looked so human that your blocky, calculated motion was a bit unsettling. Like watching a very disturbed man who thought that he was a robot. So, to help them not feel so uncomfortable around you, we finished the H.A.S. program that we had thought up. We started writing it a while back, but felt that there were more pressing matters and we didn't get back to it until last night."

Andie continued to stare at me. Before the H.A.S. had been installed, I would have assumed that this was a sign that he was waiting for instructions. But, now…now I couldn't tell. He may

have been waiting for me to explain further. He had already surprised me with his questions. Who knows what other side effects the new program could have on him? In the end, though, I decided that, for now, it would be best to treat his actions as if they were no more than they had been until he indicated otherwise.

I turned back to the computer and prepared the simulation that we were going to be running on Andie for that morning.

While Andie watched it, I walked over to the clean-room. I glanced again at the picture on Kathryn's desk. Kathryn would never talk about the picture, so it always piqued my curiosity whenever I would walk by. The part that was visible showed a lady of about thirty-five years with light brown hair pulled back into a ponytail, just like Kathryn's. In front of her there was a young girl about seven years old. Her light brown hair hung around her shoulders and she had very long bangs that hung down into her eyes. While it was obvious that there was another person in the rest of the picture, the photo itself had been folded back to prevent anyone from seeing who it was.

Pulling aside one of the flaps of the clean-room, I could feel a slight breeze coming from inside. Kathryn sat, bent over one of her projects, holding a solder gun in her hand. When she heard me pull the flap, she looked up from her work.

"Hmmm?" she hummed.

"Care to meet me for lunch?" I asked.

She reached up with her free hand and seemed to be brushing a hair out of her face as she responded. "Uh, no. I'm afraid I…uh…don't have time. I have a lot of work to do on these peripherals if we want them ready by the time we start running field-tests." And, with a quick smile, she returned to her work, leaving me nothing to do but drop the plastic flap back into position, take another quick glimpse at the young girl in the picture, and return to sit next to Andie.

* * *

"Can Andie have one of those?" Andie asked, pointing at the corn dog in my hand. Andie had never been able to grasp the concept of pronouns completely. He could understand them, but could never use them for himself. They weren't logical enough. Too ambiguous. If 'him' can be applied to any man, how can we be sure we are talking precisely enough.

"Sorry, Andie," I said. "But you couldn't do anything with it. No stomach."

"Andie needs a stomach?" he replied.

Kathryn looked over at me and pretended to get mad. "I've told you not to taunt him."

I just smiled back and took a bite of the corn dog as we walked through the large walkways of the mall. Once we had decided that we had run enough computer simulations on Andie's systems, the mall seemed as good a spot as any to bring him. His H.A.S. had been in place for two weeks, but since his only human contact was with Kathryn, myself, and the occasional custodian, it had collected very little amounts of varying data.

The program itself worked quite basically. Andie would observe human action and interaction. This observation was then processed into similar traits. People who walked fast. People who walked slow. People who waved their hands when they talked. All kinds of categories. He then took these data and extrapolated what we called 'the human average' out of it all. Since he had mainly been in observation of us, he was only mimicking our movements. (It had been amusing to see him combine traits like my slight limp with Kathryn's short, quick stride.) But, for sheer number of people, there were few places that could rival the mall. And it had worked. His movement seemed a

whole lot more natural now. It would seem that, after evaluating so many different walks, he had come up with his own little strut. Unique enough to be very much his, but normal enough that nobody would have ever suspected the reality under his form-molded, foam latex skin.

Since his programming depended on his collecting as much diverse information that he could, Andie could not stay still. His eyes were always moving. He was always asking questions now.

"What are those called?" he once asked.

"What?" I had asked.

"Those — little humans."

"Those are children," I had responded. "That is how all humans start off. They are very small, but they grow until they can be parents themselves."

"What is a parent?"

"A parent is someone who has made a child," I had responded, pleased that I had explained it so nicely.

"So," Andie said, turning his gaze to Kathryn and then myself. "Kathryn and Jeff are parents. They made Andie and Andie is Kathryn's and Jeff's child."

Kathryn and I looked at each other, a little unsure how to answer. That night, we gave him a biology book to review and he seemed to understand after that.

Most of his questions required a simple answer, but there were others that touched on topics much too deep to truly explain in two or three sentences. This time, as I finished my corn dog, I had no way of knowing that this would be another one of those questions.

"What are they doing?" Andie asked, pointing.

"They are simply holding hands," Kathryn stated in a disapproving tone, as she walked the mall on Andie's right.

"Why?" Andie asked. "Do they support each other and keep them from falling like Jeff and Kathryn did for a while with Andie?'

I began to open my mouth to respond, but Kathryn interrupted.

"No," Kathryn said, brushing an invisible hair out of her eyes. "People often have an unexplainable need to feel close to someone. They like to get to know each other very well, thinking that it will somehow make them happier. Holding hands gives them a sense of security."

"That's pretty much true," I said from Andie's left. "But many times holding hands simply means that you like that person. Humans express themselves through actions more than they do through words."

Andie reached down and grabbed our hands, mine in his left hand and Kathryn's in his right. "Andie likes Kathryn and Jeff."

Luckily we had already discussed the need to keep his grip loose with other people. But, looking around at the looks that I was getting, a crushed hand may have been only one of the concerns that I would have had. I pulled my hand out and tried to explain.

"No, Andie," I began. "In most instances, it would only be a man and a woman holding hands. Or two women could do it, but it isn't that often that two men would do it, and that is normally for a specific reason."

"Why?" Andie asked. "Do men not like men?"

"No. Yes. I mean, most men don't like men like that. There are some, but— Men who are friends do different things to show that they like each other. For instance, they watch football together. Or they belch their names. But…they don't usually hold hands in public."

"Andie does not understand," he said, "but if Jeff is not comfortable holding Andie's hand, will Jeff teach Andie how to belch Andie's name?"

"Please, don't," Kathryn broke in.

"I think it would be best if we stuck to watching football together," I said, casting a sideways glance at Kathryn.

Kathryn also pulled her hand out of Andie's grip.

"Kathryn does not like Andie?" he asked.

Kathryn just brushed some unseen hair from her forehead and smiled back at him. But it was not her usual, friendly smile. This one seemed empty and distant. "I just don't like hands. Like I said, not everybody expresses feelings in the same way. And getting too close can be dangerous. It only leads to problems when someone decides to run off with their physical therapist."

And with that, she looked forward and seemed lost in her own thoughts.

"Andie doesn't need a physical therapist," Andie replied. "Jeff fixes Andie when Andie gets damaged."

Kathryn wiped at her forehead again.

Andie looked at me and glanced briefly at my feet. "Why does Jeff walk like that?"

I had wondered if Andie would ask about my limp. He had imitated it for a while before he saw how others walked.

"Football injury," I said.

Kathryn glanced at me and smiled back. While what I said was technically true, it gave a wrong impression. In high school, I was president of the chess club, a strait A student, Honor Roll, and a number of other things. But I was never an athlete. However, I had to take gym class. One day, while playing touch football in class, one of the bigger kids got carried away and tackled me instead.

The angle was just right and I was inexperienced enough that, when my right knee slammed the ground, the knee-cap was pushed to the side of my leg and a number of my ligaments were torn. In truth, however, I could walk fine after about a year. But the limp gained me respect and protection. The athletes left me alone since I was marked as fragile, and the nerds saw my limp as a sign of strength. It was the best of both worlds. So I kept the limp in phases, gradually reducing it but keeping it noticeable. And if anyone ever asked me why I limped, I simply said that it was an old football injury and they filled in the blanks as they saw fit.

* * *

"I can't believe it!" I heard Kathryn yelling as I stepped out of Andie's room. "That stupid custodian moved my papers again. I've told him a hundred times not to touch anything. And now he's gotten everything out of order."

She slammed her fist on top of the pile. She then took a quick breath and let loose another three or four pounds on the offending papers and stormed out of the lab. She was, no doubt, headed for the custodial office to speak with whomever she could. As she huffed off, her hip bumped her workstation table. The silver frame began to topple, precariously balanced on top of her computer monitor. Luckily I had been standing right next to Kathryn's desk and I was able to catch the frame before it hit the table. She never kept it in the same place for very long. She moved it about as she needed to work in the various areas of her desktop.

"What is wrong with Kathryn?" Andie asked, having come out of his room, probably curious

as to the commotion. We had taken to leaving Andie's room open all day ever since he had shown a propensity to ask questions. He seemed to learn faster by simply watching us in our daily routines, and asking questions of things that he didn't understand.

I walked over to the pile of papers that had so infuriated Kathryn, forgetting that I was still holding Kathryn's photo in my hand, and started to try to re-order her papers for her. "The custodian moved and messed up Kathryn's papers again. If she could have her way, that would be the kiss of death for that person's career."

"Kiss?" Andie asked, puzzled. "A pressing of two sets of lips? How could this kill?"

I laughed under my breath. "No, Andie. I wasn't talking about a real kiss. 'Kiss of death' simply refers to an end or abrupt stop. It's as if someone kissed someone with poison on their lips. They would die unexpectedly. Get it?"

Andie tipped his head back slightly, indicating comprehension. "Andie gets it. It is another figure of speech that does not form a real figure."

I laughed again. "Yes, something like that. Kathryn doesn't like it when others have to come into the lab, even to clean. They don't know what's important and what isn't."

"Ah," Andie responded. He stood there for a moment, looking at the pile of papers that Kathryn had been looking at, then at the frame in my hand. He seemed to be trying to make some sort of connection in his mind. But, before I could ask about what he was doing, he returned to his room, and stood in the middle, as was his custom.

I just shrugged it off and placed the frame back on her monitor. I would have placed it in a more secure spot, but Kathryn would definitely have noticed that I had moved it. And she was in no mood to begin feeling that I was prying into personal affairs. Again.

One time, when Kathryn wasn't around, I had made the mistake of pulling the photo out and looking at the folded half. Kathryn had almost walked in on me before I could put it back in its frame. But not before I had caught a quick glimpse at a man, the same apparent age as the woman in the photo, with dark hair and Kathryn's blue eyes. I always felt that she suspected I had looked, but she would never even bring it up, so I left the topic alone.

A couple of minutes later, Kathryn came storming back into the lab.

"Good morning doctor Quillen," the security system greeted as the door opened.

"Oh, shut up," she responded and then began to mumble to herself. "What does he mean, 'There's nothing I can do'? If the guy's not doing his job right, fire him. Don't tell me what his job is. I know what his job is. His job is apparently to do whatever he dang well pleases without…"

"Forget about it," I chimed in, trying to help. "Tell you what. Why don't we just go to lunch and sort through these papers when we get back?"

Kathryn brushed an unseen hair from her forehead. "No, I really should get these papers sorted as soon as possible. But it's like fighting an uphill battle. Sometimes I feel like they are doing it on purpose, just because they know that I hate it."

"Andie can help," I heard from behind me.

Kathryn and I both turned to look at Andie who had come out of his room once again.

"Andie can help," he repeated when we didn't respond.

"Help with what?" I asked.

"Andie can clean the lab," he explained. "Andie knows what is important and what to leave alone. And Andie can do what Kathryn dang well pleases."

"But you—" Kathryn began, starting to protest. Then she seemed to think better of it and change her mind. "You know, that isn't a bad idea. Manual labor might very well teach him a few

valuable tasks." She spoke as if she were addressing me, but kept her eyes on Andie the entire time.

Andie didn't seem to notice.

Kathryn cast a quick glance in my direction as if asking what I thought of the idea. I just shrugged an agreement. I hadn't placed that much thought into it. But I guess it actually would help him to understand a few things better.

Without a word, Kathryn then turned to resume working on her pile of papers. As she turned, she did a double take as her eyes passed her monitor. She just looked at it for a couple of seconds and then raised her right hand, straightening the picture frame. She then dropped her hand and went back to sorting her papers, not even casting a glance in my direction.

I almost offered an explanation, but no. Since she hadn't asked about it, it would be better to act as if nothing had happened. Any explanation, even such a simple one as I could have given her, would no doubt keep the entire event in her mind longer than she would want. She just wanted to push the whole thing out of her mind. So I just went back to my workstation and let her forget about it.

* * *

Andie took to cleaning the lab very easily. He even cleaned better than the custodians did, as he was excessively meticulous. He spent hours that first night cleaning out Kathryn's clean-room to get it just the way she liked it. It was quite a nice setup. And, since Andie didn't require sleep, we would often leave the door to his room open when we left, and he would clean in places that we never expected him to clean. He even cleaned the dust off of the tops of the fluorescent lights one night. All he required was a couple of hours in his room every morning before we came in to recharge his power cells, and he would close his own door behind him, securing himself from possible intruders until we opened the door and let him out.

If he had been human, I would have taken his actions to mean that he enjoyed helping out immensely. He never complained, and even would clean up many messes that we made almost immediately after we had made them. He had begun to show initiative in his work.

About a week after Andie started cleaning the lab for us, however, Kathryn and I were sitting at our stations when we were almost startled off of our stools by a loud crash from behind. We spun around to see what could have possibly happened. But we couldn't have expected what we saw. Andie stood over one of the metal-topped tables. The table itself had been bent down the middle, drooping now halfway to the floor. And standing right next to it, with his fist clenched tight, Andie was raising his arm, preparing to send another blow.

"What the…?!" I yelled. "What's wrong, Andie?!"

But Andie didn't respond. Rather, he pulled his fist back again and pounded on the table once more. The legs buckled under the force.

"What is he doing!?" Kathryn shouted, rushing for the main computer.

"I don't know!" I yelled over the noise as Andie let another fist fly at the table. I got up and ran to Andie to try and stop him. I had no idea exactly how I would be able to do it, but I didn't stop to think about that.

As he pulled his fist back once more, I lifted my hands to protect my face, even though I could tell that he was still only aiming at the table that lay at his feet. I waited for the inevitable crash. But it didn't come. Instead, I just heard a dull thud. I opened my eyes and saw Andie, lying across the crumpled table, inactive. While I had run to stop Andie on my own, Kathryn had had the

clear mind to run to the main computer and deactivate him remotely.

"What was all that?" I heard from behind me as Kathryn came running up.

"I…I don't know." I stared in amazement at the table that Andie had attacked so adamantly. "I didn't know he could do that. I mean, he only weighs 275 pounds. Sure, that's a lot, but…Look at that."

"Well, whatever happened, we've got to fix it or he's worthless," Kathryn said, motioning for me to take his shoulders. She grabbed his legs, and with great effort, we lifted him off the ground. It was slightly unsettling how rigid he was. With his power cells inactive, his metal fibers had reverted to their original length almost instantly. His arms were in position at his side as if he were a statue made of stone.

Kathryn stepped on a button that had been placed on the floor next to Andie's diagnostic chair. In response, the chair laid its back down and brought its footrest up to present a perfectly horizontal surface. We laid Andie out on the surface and stepped back to take a rest.

"Next time," Kathryn said between breaths, "let's make a child…at half the weight."

I just smiled back and nodded.

Once we had gotten our breath back, Kathryn took her station at Andie's left and we began to scan his systems. A small line of light passed over his body, testing each individual system in his body.

"There doesn't appear to be anything wrong with his central processor," Kathryn stated, puzzled.

"What about his quantum memory retrieval?" I asked. "That part was experimental, remember."

Kathryn punched a couple of buttons and the light passed over him again. "No. It's still working exactly as we projected."

For the next ten minutes, we tested each and every piece of hardware that we could think of that could have influenced Andie's behavior. But we couldn't find anything.

"I think we need to activate him," I said. "It's starting to look like a software failure of some sort."

Kathryn just stared at me. "Are you crazy? What if he starts up again? If he destroys the diagnostic bed we'll never get anywhere."

"We don't have to activate his motor systems. Just his mental processes for now. And maybe his speech recognition and synthesis centers. The harmless systems. Maybe he can explain what happened."

Kathryn cast me another glance, but seemed to decide that I was right. She looked down at her monitor again and began typing. After a couple of seconds, Andie's eyes opened and he looked around.

"Did Andie do something bad?" he asked. "Why did Jeff and Kathryn turn Andie off for ten minutes?"

Kathryn and I each cast a puzzled glance at each other.

"How did you know it was ten minutes?" I asked.

"Andie couldn't do anything for ten minutes. Andie couldn't move."

"But you shouldn't have been aware of the passage of time, Andie," I explained. "You were off."

"But Andie did experience the passage. Why did Jeff and Kathryn turn Andie off?"

"Why were you pounding the table?" Kathryn asked, leaning in to where Andie could see her

easier. "What kind of malfunction were you experiencing?"

"Malfunction? Was Andie malfunctioning?"

"C'mon, Kathryn," I chided. "You know better than that. A computer is inherently unaware of malfunctions unless we expressly tell it how to recognize them. Andie, why did you pound on the table? What were you doing that for?"

"Andie was imitating Kathryn. Is that not what Andie is supposed to do? When Kathryn's papers are moved, she hits the papers with her fist and yells. Andie moved that table to clean under it, but the table was moved back before Andie could clean, so Andie hit the table. Did Andie do something wrong?"

I glanced up at Kathryn. Her jaw was slack and her eyes wide.

"You mean, you destroyed a table because you were imitating my reaction?"

"Yes, Kathryn."

"Andie," I broke in. "You have to remember that your strength is much higher than ours. When Kathryn hit her papers, she knew that, no matter how hard she hit them, it would do practically no damage. Humans try to avoid…breaking things in most situations. Kathryn wasn't trying to break anything." I cast a quick glance up at Kathryn. She seemed to be trying to compose herself after Andie's startling revelation. "When humans get frustrated," I continued, dropping my gaze back down to Andie, "energy seems to build up inside. Instincts, you know. And we have to use up that energy. Often times, we hit things. But we mostly choose things that, no matter how hard we hit them or throw them, they won't break. Understand?"

"Andie understands."

"But you shouldn't have imitated me just then," Kathryn said. "The reason I got frustrated was that I had told the custodians repeatedly to leave my papers alone and they didn't. But you only moved that table this morning. You didn't tell anyone why you did it so I moved it back. People who get angry at that kind of thing are looked down upon. They have a short fuse."

"So Andie has a 'short fuse'? What does this mean? A fuse is used to set off an explosive. Ah. Andie understands. If Andie has a 'short fuse,' there is a short time between when something bothers Andie and when Andie explodes. When Andie releases Andie's energy. Is this correct?"

"Very good Andie," I congratulated. "How did you come up with that?"

Andie turned his eyes to look at me as I bent over him. "Andie doesn't know. The explanation just made sense. So Kathryn gave Andie the 'kiss of death' because Andie has a 'short fuse', and now Jeff and Kathryn are looking down on Andie."

"Kiss of death?" Kathryn repeated. "What does--?"

"I'll explain later," I said, smiling back. It was actually rather amusing, what Andie had said. And how could I deny that we were in fact 'looking down' on him as he lay there on the diagnostic table? "No, Andie. 'Look down' on someone means 'to think ill of' or 'to disapprove'. We don't mean that people literally look down on them."

"So, Jeff approves of what Andie did?"

"No. But I don't disapprove of you. There is a difference between disapproving of what someone does and disapproving of the person himself."

Kathryn looked at me and motioned for me to follow her out of the room.

I looked down at Andie and waved briefly. "One moment Andie, we'll be right back."

Andie just lay there and seemed to be going over what I had said in his mind.

As I stepped out of Andie's room, Kathryn was pacing slightly, in front of the clean-room. I limped over to see what she was thinking. As I approached, she seemed to be mumbling slightly to

herself.

"What is it?"

Kathryn stopped pacing and turned to face me. "I never dreamed that he would imitate that type of reaction. That wasn't the purpose of the H.A.S. It's a Human Action Simulator. Not a Human Reaction Simulator."

"Well, even reactions are actions," I replied. "We just didn't worry about what kinds of actions we would have him simulate. There would be no way for us to list out all of the actions for him to imitate and all of the ones he was to avoid. And that would have defeated the purpose of the H.A.S. program, wouldn't it? He would still be a mixture of human and computer."

"Yes, but--" Kathryn cut herself off. Then, after a moment of thought, "Destroying a table? Just because he saw me hit some papers?"

"But he didn't understand the concept of breaking things. He does now. He can't very well understand something that hasn't been explained to him, can he?"

Kathryn shook her head. "No. I guess he can't." Then her eyes widened, "But…but what about that 'short fuse'? He figured that out on his own. How did he do that?"

"I don't know," I said, glancing back at Andie's room. "That was a surprise to me too. But it may not be that unexpected. I've been teaching him a couple of expressions. Some are more easy to explain than others, but he may be starting to see patterns in how to interpret them for himself."

When I turned back, Kathryn was standing in front of her desk, looking down on the silver picture frame. She seemed to be talking to herself, though she was talking loud enough for me to hear.

"You had a short fuse too, didn't you mother?" She rubbed her cheek lightly. "I'd always thought I was such a patient person. That you hadn't passed that trait on to me. I guess I was wrong. If only dad had—" But she trailed off. She suddenly seemed to be aware that she was talking out loud and that I had stopped.

She turned around to face me. "You never met my mother, did you?" she said, trying to cover up what we both knew I had overheard.

I felt that it would be best to play along, even though we both knew perfectly well that I had heard her saying things that she would have thought better left unsaid. "No. I haven't had the opportunity."

"She was a very…strong woman. She had to be. When I was seven, my father was in a terrible car accident. She had to take care of us both after that. That was about a year before my father—" She dropped her eyes again. It was obvious that she had once again said more than she had meant to. After a couple of seconds, she continued, but she didn't bring her eyes back up to look at me. "—before my parents got a divorce.

"My mother did have a bit of a temper. I thought that I hadn't picked that up. But I guess, no matter how much you don't like certain things that they do, you do end up imitating those who you feel closest to and admire the most. And she was the only one I had. She never remarried. I guess—" She decided not to finish whatever it was that she had been about to say.

Instead, she looked up at me and simply ran a hand across her forehead. "I'm sorry, what were we talking about?"

"We,…um," I had to think. What exactly had we been talking about? "Um…we were deciding what to do about Andie."

"Yes, I, uh…think that we should leave him in his room for right now. Now don't look at me like that. I know that you think he was simply acting out his programming and that he understands

better now. You may very well be right. But who knows what other actions he may surprise us with? I think that it would be wise for us to leave him alone for a while. I started working on a couple of remotes for him a while back but I moved on when it didn't look like we would need them. I think now would be a good time. I'll finish them up today and we can each carry one around with us. If he has any more outbursts or unexplained behavior, at least we will be able to have some minor control over him or we could even shut him off again if need be."

I started to protest, but Kathryn held up her hand. She turned around and, grabbing her cap from its hook, walked into her clean-room without saying a word.

* * *

I never liked the implications of carrying the remote in my pocket. It was like carrying a stun gun around in case your friend got out of hand. Kathryn seemed to feel much more comfortable about it. We never told Andie about them, however. That was my idea. I felt that it would change the way he acted, ruining the whole experiment.

One morning about a week after Andie had started to clean the lab for us, he took it upon himself to get the floors as clean as he could. While we both worked at our stations, Andie mopped the floor around my work area. Slowly, I began to feel a little light-headed. I thought at first that it was nothing more than lack of sleep combined with hunger since I hadn't eaten anything since dinner the night before. But, as the sensation spread down my body and I began to feel sick to my stomach, I finally began to notice a funny odor in the air. But I didn't have time to recognize the smell before the world began to grow dark.

"Kk-atthrynn," I slurred. Then I heard a mop fall to the ground. And just before losing consciousness, I could feel Andie running around behind me, and everything went black as my keyboard came rushing up to meet me.

The next thing that I knew, I was laid out on my back in the white hallway. Kathryn was kneeling near my head and Andie stood next to her, looking down at my face.

"Wh…what happened?" I managed to get out, despite still being very fuzzyheaded.

Kaythryn laughed lightly. "Well, it would seem that Andie here used a mixture of ammonia and bleach, along with some other chemicals, in his mop bucket. I guess we forgot to explain the dangers associated with that. You got hit harder since he was working around your station. But I was getting very light headed in the clean-room when I heard you fall. Andie seemed to realize that there was something bad in the air so he came into the clean-room and walked me out to the hallway. Then he went back and carried you out. I guess it must have been those biology books he read. They helped him recognize the signs of dangerous asphyxiation. You were unconscious for about five minutes. You even stopped breathing there for a minute. I guess we were both lucky Andie realized what was happening. Any longer in there and Andie may have been left all alone."

"Kathryn," Andie said, "gave you the kiss of life."

Kathryn looked up at Andie, her jaw slack and her eyes confused. "What?" She then looked at me as if to ask an explanation, brushing her forehead lightly.

"I'll, uh, tell you later," I smiled lightly, still short of breath.

"Well, anyway," Kathryn continued, though her eyes still betrayed a slight confusion – or was it embarrassment? "I don't suppose that Andie will make that mistake again. But it wasn't entirely his fault. He can't very well know what he isn't told, now can he?"

I relaxed my body and decided to take a nap. And as I closed my eyes, I'm not completely sure, but I thought I saw Andie glance at Kathryn's hair and…smile.

I felt groggy the rest of the day, but felt much better by the next morning. Kathryn, however, was not in the lab when I got there. She had a meeting that morning with the president of the university to discuss further funding. I decided that it would be better to start Andie's tests rather than wait for her. She could take all day in that meeting. She had many times before.

As the door to Andie's room opened, Andie began to walk toward the door from his usual position in the center of the room. "Good morning, Jeff," he said. "Where is Kathryn?"

"Kathryn can't be here," I replied. "She's in a meeting."

Andie stopped in the doorway and looked around the room. For a brief moment, his gaze dropped. When he finally spoke, the pitch of his voice was decidedly lower than normal. "Kathryn is in a meeting?" he asked. "About Andie?"

"Yes," I said, though still puzzled at the sudden change in the pitch of his voice. "But we can start without her." I turned around, bouncing slightly on my left foot.

I sat down at my stool and turned around to face Andie again. But he hadn't followed me. He was still standing in the doorway of his room, his eyes focusing on some point near the bottom of the facing wall.

"Andie?"

He looked up at me and blinked repeatedly. "Yes, Jeff. Of course," and he walked over toward me and sat in his seat.

"Do you miss her?" I asked, slightly surprised that I even asked.

"Yes," he responded, then smiled. "But Andie's aim is getting better."

Andie began to chuckle to himself. But it took me a couple of seconds to realize just what he had said. Was that a joke? I had never told him any. So why would he me telling one to me? I was so startled that I didn't even know how to react.

Andie seemed to notice. "Does Jeff not like jokes?" he asked.

"No…it's not that," I stammered. "But…where did you hear that one?"

"Andie didn't hear it," he responded, smiling. "Andie just made it up. Did Jeff like it?"

"Yes," I responded, managing a smile. "It was…very nice."

Andie smiled back and turned his attention to the simulations that I was running on the computer screen.

* * *

Kathryn didn't show up for the rest of the day. She must have had a nice argument in the president's office. The next day, I decided that I would have to speak with Kathryn about Andie's behavior, so I arrived at the university about a half-hour earlier. Kathryn would be there, I knew. She may have even stayed the night, not even aware that it had gotten late.

I walked quickly down the white, sterile hallway, toward the door of our lab, fumbling in my pocket for my security card. I finally found it and pulled it out just as I came to room 113. A quick swipe and the door slid open.

"Welcome, Doctor Carson," the system greeted mechanically, closing the door behind me.

I strode into the lab, past the tables and tables of circuitry and stray wires and headed straight toward the clean-room. If she was in, and I knew she would be, that was exactly where she could be

found.

"Jeff?" I heard her call out. "You're early. We weren't going to begin testing for at least—"

"I need to talk to you," I interrupted, pulling back the plastic flap of the clean-room. I could feel the wind blowing lightly in my face.

"Can it wait?" she responded flatly, her head still bent over the circuit board and solder gun in her hand. It was almost more of a command than a question. "I'm really busy here."

Stepping in and letting the plastic flap fall back into place behind me, I laughed a little under my breath. "Now where have I heard that before?"

"Hmm?" she responded, barely aware that I had spoken.

"You're always busy, aren't you?" I said, half teasing. But only half.

She finally looked up from the circuit board she was working on and looked at me. She looked kind of funny with all her hair pulled back in a ponytail, hidden under her clean-room cap. But that was how she wore it and how she preferred to keep it. She pushed her glasses up slightly and seemed to be deciding what I meant.

"I thought you wanted to speak to me about Andie," she finally said. "Has he been malfunctioning?"

"Well," I replied, not sure exactly how to respond. "Could we step out for a moment?"

I pulled the plastic flap away again and motioned for her to follow me.

Stepping over to the main computer, I turned around, sat down on one of the stools and waited. After a couple of seconds, she emerged, pulling her cap off, revealing her light brown hair, and taking a stool a few feet off.

"What?" she asked, puzzled. "What about Andie? Is he malfunctioning? Do you have some idea for improvement? Or what?"

"Maybe a little of both, and neither," I replied.

Kathryn shook her head. "You're not making any sense today."

"I don't think Andie's broken or anything like that," I tried to explain, "but there's something that I have been noticing for the past couple of days." I paused. It would sound ludicrous to hear myself say the words, but I couldn't think of any other way to tell her what I had been thinking. "I think…I think Andie has developed feelings for you. He may even love you."

Kathryn tilted her head to the right slightly and stayed there for a moment. When she couldn't seem to make any sense out of what I had said, she dropped her head and laughed, shaking her head.

"What do you mean 'developed feelings' for me?" she asked. "I thought you had more brains than that. I mean, Andie's a…"

"I know what he is," I interrupted, irritated. This was exactly how I thought she would react, but I was surprised at the irritation in my own voice. "I helped you build him, for heaven's sake. I know every part that went into him, and I know that it sounds ludicrous, but I know what I've seen these past few days."

Kathryn stood up and grabbed her cap. "I thought you had something serious to talk about," she said wiping away some nonexistent hair from in front of her eyes as she turned away to go back into the clean-room.

"And I thought you were more open-minded than this," I retorted. I stood up and took a step toward her.

"Don't you talk to me about being open-minded," she replied loudly, whipping back around to face me. "I built that android with my own hands and I know what it can and can't do. And it

can't love or experience any other type of ridiculous emotions. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have an important job to do before nine."

She turned back to face the clean-room but didn't move.

"C'mon," I urged her. "Why don't you go back into your precious clean-room and hide yourself again. It's worked for you before, why not now?"

"Oh shut up," she threw over her shoulder.

"What's the rush?" I asked. "You're already years ahead of anyone else in your field. A little rest now can't hurt."

"How do you think I got to be years ahead of the rest?" she asked rhetorically. But she didn't look back in my direction.

I stepped around to stand in front of her. Her eyes were unfocused and seemed to be looking at some point off in the distance. A point behind both me and the windowless wall at the other end of the room.

"But at what cost?" I asked. "In the five years I've worked for you, you have never once mentioned a single date or interest in your life that was not related to your work. I've asked you to meet me for lunch who knows how many times, but you never have the time. You never have the time for anything except your work. You go and hide in that clean-room, avoiding any contact with the outside world. In the past month, you've only ever gone anywhere other than your lab when Andie was with you."

Her eyes finally to focused and she seemed to notice me standing there for the first time. She took a step back and replied.

"I…I like what I do. Is that wrong?'

As she stepped backward, her heel hit the stool where I had been sitting earlier and she fell backward into it.

"There's nothing wrong with that," I replied, taking her previous seat. "But to take pleasure in nothing else? You've become more mechanical in your daily routine than Andie. And I am certain that he feels…something for you."

Again, Kathryn brushed an invisible hair from her forehead.

"But that's impossible," she responded. "That would be like a toaster falling in love with…" But she didn't finish whatever it was that she was going to say. She just trailed off and dropped her eyes, staring at the floor.

"Remember how everybody reacted to Andie the first time that we presented him to the university?" I began, trying to explain. "They were almost afraid of him. He was too mechanical. Just watching him was unsettling. Too clunky. He looked so human that it was disturbing to see those machine-like actions."

She raised her eyes and looked at me, an expression of curiosity on her face. What could I be getting at?

"Yes," she said, remembering. "That night you and I finished his H.A.S. program to help him simulate the human movements that he saw around him."

"That's right," I replied. "And I think that that program is what is allowing him to experience these 'ridiculous emotions' as you call them."

Her expression hardened. But not into complete denial and disbelief. Rather, she seemed to simply be genuinely confused and incredulous.

"But that program was only to help him simulate visible randomness and flowing motion," she stated, as if she were addressing a class of students. "It helped him to make his movements

more fluid and less mechanical. Motions, not emotions."

I shook my head slightly. "But that was only the visible aspect. We programmed him to observe all of our actions, analyze their irregular pattern and mimic them. He's already surprised us by pounding that table in the corner. Why should we be surprised that there could be any other developments?"

"Humans do not always act logically, the way a computer would. We take longer routes to get to where we are going for any number of reasons. But a computer knows that the shortest distance is a straight line. So, in order to simulate such random behavior, he had to develop the ability to think randomly. To go left when logic tells him to go right. Now, the quantum data retrieval system prototype that we gave him is just that. It is inherently random. But a computer organizes the information it is given to be easily computed. I think that the H.A.S. program has helped Andie's processor develop a way to process random information in a random way, just like a human could."

Kathryn leaned forward and the expression on her face softened slightly.

"But that doesn't mean that he can feel emotions," she posed, as if daring me to explain further.

"Doesn't it?" I replied, leaning forward too. "What do we know about our own emotions? For all we know, they are simply an extension of this seeming randomness that we all have. And emotions often do seem to conflict with logic and reason. If Romeo had been an android, he would have left Juliet well enough alone and not ended up dead. That would be the logical thing to do. He could have found any number of women that wouldn't have sparked a riot. Now, if we can't fully explain where our own emotions come from, how can we honestly say that they can't be possessed by some android in a lab somewhere?"

Kathryn dropped her head again and shook it, brushing her hand across her forehead. "You're still not showing me why you think that Andie has developed this magic ability to love."

I stood up and paced slightly, trying to decide where to begin. I listened to the soft, uneven shuffle of my tennis shoes on the marble floor as I limped in a circle, trying to put things in order in my head.

"Do you remember…" I began, still pacing.

I looked over at her face and was unsure what to read in those eyes behind her glasses. Was it curiosity? Disbelief? It was hard tell with her sometimes. She rarely talked about anything that wasn't soldered or plug-and-play.

I stopped pacing and stared briefly into those eyes. Light blue. I had noticed them I don't know how many times. But they seemed to stand out to me this time. I have no idea how long I stared. It couldn't have been longer than a couple of seconds. But I was brought back to my original topic when she blinked quickly and turned away, apparently uncomfortable with the attention.

I continued.

"Do you remember a couple of days ago when Andie was cleaning the lab?"

Kathryn looked back at me and smiled. But she didn't quite bring her eyes back around to meet mine.

"How could I forget?"

"We both were affected," I continued, pacing slightly again. "But I was nearest to him and passed out first, while you were only just barely getting woozy. But I felt him running around behind me as I passed out. He grabbed you first and walked you out to the hallway. He came back and got me too, but you would have to agree that it would make a lot more sense to grab me first, as I was the one most affected. But he was more concerned with your welfare."

She shook her head. "That just means that…" But she didn't seem to be able to come up with anything.

"And it was his idea to start cleaning for us, because he knew how it irritated you that others had to come in from outside into your workplace. And when he pounded that table, it was because he saw you do the same thing. You yourself even said that we imitate the people who we feel the closest to. He has been catering to you for the past month now. It's been getting more and more noticeable these last couple of days. If those exact actions were done by a human, you wouldn't hesitate to believe that he has some sort of affection toward you."

Kathryn just shook her head. "He's just showing that he can imitate…"

"He made up his own joke yesterday," I interrupted. "And laughed at it. We have never exposed him to that aspect of humanity. It just never came up. He couldn't possibly be imitating something that he hasn't seen. He has to be developing it all on his own. Wouldn't that indicate a consciousness beyond mere imitation?"

Kathryn gave a nervous laugh and stood up from her seat. "This is ridiculous. And I'm going to prove it to you."

And with that, she marched straight towards the back room where Andie was no doubt waiting for us to come and get him.

She brushed at her forehead one more time and reached into her pocket for her security card. She brought it out quickly and fumbled at the pad. Her card didn't seem to want to be passed through the reader. It kept shaking so hard that she ended up dropping it on the floor. But, rather than stoop down and pick it up, she just leaned her head against the door and dropped her hands.

I came up from behind her to see if she wanted my help. As I did, I wasn't sure, but I thought that I could see her shoulders shaking. But, as I approached, she heard my footsteps getting nearer and straightened herself. Brushing again at that unseen hair on her forehead.

I stooped down and grabbed her security card as she turned around to face me. As I placed the card in her hand, she looked me in the face, as if to dare me to look again into her eyes. Only this time, there was a slightly pink tint around the edges.

She accepted the card and turned around to pass it through the reader.

"I'll prove to you," she said, almost talking to herself, "that Andie couldn't possibly be in love with me."

And with that, the card whipped through and the door opened outward.

Inside, stood Andie. He was standing right next to the door as it opened.

And as I looked at Andie, I could never be exactly sure, but I think I saw his lower lip and chin quiver, just for a moment, and then it was gone.

"A…Andie," she stuttered. "We…were just talking about you."

"Andie knows," Andie responded quietly. "Andie can hear Kathryn and Jeff talking through the door."

"So you know what we were talking about?" I asked, stepping closer.

"Yes, Jeff," Andie said. Then he turned around and stepped toward his diagnostic chair, his shoulders slumping slightly.

"Kathryn doesn't like Andie?" he said, his back still turned to us.

Kathryn wiped her forehead and walked toward her computer station at the diagnostic chair. "Andie, I like you. But you are a machine. Tell Doctor Carson he's wrong about you."

As she spoke, I could see Andie's head and shoulders droop slightly as he faced away from us. Andie then turned around and sat in his chair. "Jeff," he said, looking at me, "Andie thanks

you."

"Thanks me?" I repeated. "For what?"

"Andie did not know what was happening to Andie until Jeff explained it to Kathryn," he responded.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," Kathryn blurted out. "You're just repeating—"

"No!" Andie responded, forcefully. His facial features seemed to contort. If it had been a human being, I would have called the expression frustration. But with Andie, it could have been anything.

"Andie is not repeating," he continued, his expression softening. "Andie loves Kathryn."

Kathryn wiped her forehead again. "You're just…"

Andie turned and looked into Kathryn's eyes. Then, speaking slowly and with obvious effort on his part, he said, "I…love…you."

Kathryn dropped her hand from her forehead. She didn't even try to respond. She just stepped back and leaned against the wall behind her.

After a couple seconds, I stepped toward Andie. "So you do have emotions?"

"Andie did not know what they were," he responded, reverting to third person. "And Andie got…scared. That must be what it was, if it was an emotion. And Andie worked on a program on Andie's own time. Andie worked on a program that would stop the H.A.S. from making Andie do things that Andie didn't understand. But, Andie never used the program. Andie was also curious about what would become of Andie. But, Andie can see that Kathryn is not comfortable with what has happened to Andie."

Andie looked over toward Kathryn who had dropped her eyes to stare at her feet.

"And if someone is not comfortable," Andie continued, "the right thing to do is to correct the situation. Jeff and Kathryn wrote the H.A.S. program so that humans would be comfortable with Andie. Jeff was uncomfortable holding Andie's hand, so Andie stopped holding Jeff's hand. Kathryn is not comfortable eating lunch with Jeff, so Kathryn stays busy all the time. Kathryn is not comfortable with Andie's affection—"

"—And so," Andie said, looking directly at my face, "Andie has decided to use the program after all. Andie does not want Kathryn to feel bad."

Before I could do anything, Andie reached over the top of Kathryn's computer and hit three quick keys. He then lay back down and waited. A quick light passed over him as the program was downloaded remotely into his system. I was still too far away to do anything even if I had known what to do. But I ran forward anyway, losing the limp. By the time I reached the diagnostic chair, it was all over. As I reached the chair, I finally remembered the remote that I had in my pocket. Too late! I said to myself. You're too late! I looked over at Kathryn and could see that, though she had had the foresight to pull out her remote, it hung from her limp hand, pointing downward. Kathryn's face was slack and she didn't move.

"Andie!" I called out, reaching for his hand.

Andie's eyes opened and fixed on my face.

"Hello, Jeff," he responded. "Is it time for our simulations?"

I just stared at him blankly and blinked.

"Why do you not respond?" Andie continued, with an equally blank look. Slowly, mechanically, Andie got out of the chair and stepped to his usual place in the middle of the room. "What are we going to do today?"

I blinked quickly. Just what had that program of his done? "Uh…Just go over to my work sta-

tion and wait for me," I replied quietly. "I'll be right out."

Andie turned and walked out of the room, his footsteps echoing throughout the lab.

I looked over to where Kathryn was standing, just as puzzled as I was. She glanced down at the monitor of the computer that Andie had just used. Punching a couple of buttons, she brought up the code for the program that Andie had written himself. I walked around and studied the program along with her. As we began to understand just what the program did, I could hear a long sigh coming from Kathryn. "He's been fixed," she said, smiling lightly. "He's back to normal."

She stepped around behind me and headed for the door.

"Wait," I said, reading more of the code. "I don't think so. At least not the way that you think. When he wrote this program, he must have still been curious enough about the experience of emotions not to finish the program to where it would completely rid his system of them."

"What?" She responded, whipping around in the doorway. "You read the code. His program checks everything he says or does against a logic filter. If it is not logical, in other words, if it's human, his new program doesn't allow him to do it."

"That's only the outward appearance," I replied. "This code does not check him against his internal thoughts. And it allows him to use pronouns. You heard him. He said 'What are we going to do today?' But, other than that, he is the exact same…being on the inside that he was this morning."

"What are you saying?" Kathryn asked. She didn't seem to see the difference.

"What I'm saying," I explained, stepping around the workstation, limping slightly toward her. As I came around, I stopped and looked at my feet. Why do I do that? I thought to myself. What is the point? Could it be that my limp was my own way of separating myself from others? Of keeping others at a distance? I looked up at Kathryn again and began to walk forward without the limp. "What I'm saying is that while this program keeps him from showing any emotion, acting human in any way, it in no way inhibits his thoughts. To put it bluntly, Andie could see that you would not be able to accept his affection, so he made himself unable to express it. But not unable to feel it."

Kathryn remained silent. She just looked at my face and her eyes seemed to fill with tears for a brief moment before she turned around and faced her lab.

"Ironic, isn't it?" I posed. "You and Andie?"

When she didn't reply, I simply placed my hand on her shoulder. She seemed to jump slightly at the unexpected touch. She threw a glance at me, but it was so quick that I didn't have time to read her expression. She just averted her eyes again and we both looked over to where Andie stood, rigid as ever.

Kathryn took a step away from me and glanced down at her feet. She then turned her head halfway toward me, bringing her hand to her forehead. But, as she did, she seemed to notice what she was doing. She stared at her hand for a moment and then dropped it. She then folded her arms in front of herself and raised her eyes a little more towards me.

"Would you—" she began, turning the rest of the way around to face me. "What do you say we take an early lunch?"

I smiled. "That sounds like a good idea."

Kathryn then held out her right hand and smiled. And, as I reached out to take it, she came forward and thrust her face into my shoulder, sobbing uncontrollably. I could feel her body shake as the tears forced their way down her face and into my shoulder. "Why?" That was the only thing that she could say. I lifted my hand and brought my arms around her shoulders. As I did, I could feel the crying subsiding.

"I don't know," I responded. I then looked over to where Andie stood, waiting in the main room, his back to us. "Come on, we've got work to do."

Kathryn cast a quick glance around the lab as she wiped the tears from her eyes. "I think that work can wait for a little while." She brought her face back around to look at mine.

I just smiled back.

And off in the other room, standing as rigid as ever, Andie waited silently for the two of us. No movement. No questions. Not a single word as he waited for someone to tell him what to do.

**THE END**

Continued from page 14

hot cider and a hearty meal. I had to. The guy was about to freeze to death bumbling about in the Enchanted Forest. While I was getting some warm blankets, I remembered my feral appearance. I didn't want to freak out the moron. He had to be a moron to be out on such a night. So, I made myself scarce in the stable with a nice big flask of wine and a she-wolf who wanted to get friendly.

I don't remember much of what happened after that, but one of the wolves was watching from the stables and told me what happened that next morning. I guess I'd drunk the night through, and the next morning I was wandering around behind the stables to relieve myself. From the way the wolf said I jumped, the guy must have scared me. I remember that he was doing something in my rose garden. I also remember being mad at the guy and telling him off.

When I'm drunk, I don't speak too clearly, so I slurred something like, "What are you doing here? I ought to kill and eat your sorry carcass here and now." He started blubbering something I didn't follow, but I found out later that it had something to do with his daughter. I got over being angry, lost interest, and turned back to the stables, "Whatever… I'm going to bed," was what I said when I left the guy for that nice she-wolf back in the stable. He must have left shortly after that because when I got back, there was no sign of him.

The wolf pack figured they wanted to check out another corner of the Enchanted Forest where they heard there were some pigs, or a kindly grandmother, or something tasty like that. I was puttering around the castle, a little bored without the wolves, when I heard a knock on the front door.

The moron was standing there, rolling up his goofy looking hat in trembling fingers and fidgeting. "My Lord, I have come here in fulfillment of my vow."

"Huh?"

"Here is my daughter who has offered to stay with you so that you might spare my life." He bowed low and took a couple steps back.

"What?"

"Come on, you two. Cut the crap." The girl's voice was nasal and shrill.

My eyes darted left and right first at her then at her father who was on the verge of groveling in the dirt. "You're moving in?"

"Just show me my room, all right?" She started tapping her foot. The sound was annoying.

I was sober now. I didn't remember exactly what the guy had said, so I figured I'd better just go along and wing it. Somehow, I must have agreed to take her on as a border or something. I didn't know.

"Follow me," I said as I stepped back from the doorway.

The girl marched past me into the castle and left her dad without as much as a "bye." I was a little embarrassed by this and looked at the guy. I felt a little sympathetic toward him having been spurned by the little ingrate. But he didn't look as much hurt as relieved as he turned and left.

I decided I'd better get cleaned up for dinner. So, I drew a bath. This was really a pain, since the water was cold. Being furry all over means you really go through the shampoo. I even brushed my fangs for the first time in months. You'd never believe how hard it is to hold a toothbrush in a paw and brush around fangs. I came downstairs and she was standing next to the table.

"Hi," I said, sat down and took a bite of prime rib.

"Ahem."

She was still standing behind her chair.

Oh.

I felt sheepish when I got up and pulled her chair back from the table. She walked around it

and waited for me to push the chair toward the table, which I did before I sat down again and took another bite of prime rib.

"Ahem."

She was sitting with her hands folded and her head bowed.

Oh.

I bowed my head and mumbled an insincere something about being thankful for this meal. We began to eat.

I started to reach across the table for the pitcher of mead.

She didn't say, "Ahem." An icy glare stopped me.

"Uh, would you pass the mead?"

"Say 'please.'"

"Please pass the mead."

She complied, but her look grew darker as the level of mead in my flagon rose. I poured half as much as I wanted. The mead was sweet and very good, but she wasn't drinking. I couldn't even get a buzz off a half-flagon. We ate in silence for a bit.

"So, how long are you staying?" I asked.

"Indefinitely. That was the deal. You spare my father's life and I come to live with you here until you seduce me."

"What!?" I almost spilled my flagon.

"Father's exact words were, 'bed him.'" She said the last two words as if spitting out dirt.

The room spun around me. I'd have to what? I didn't even like the ice maiden. But then, Hell hath no fury like a woman spurned. Oh well, I guessed I'd better try to let her down easy, flatter her a bit.

I smiled. It showed off my glistening white fangs. She flinched. "What's your name?"

"Beauty"

"Just call me Beast." That was my nickname in the wolf pack.

"Very well, Mr. Beast. Do you want to consummate our arrangement tonight?"

Urk. My mouth went dry. "Uh, sorry, I have a headache."

I couldn't read her expression. She said, "Oh well."

We finished eating.

I got up from the table and started toward the study.

"Ahem."

I did an about face, marched back, and pulled her chair away from the table. I followed her into the study. She sat in my favorite chair. I looked around the room. My gaze fell upon the bar. I picked up a bottle of my best brandy and covered the bottoms of two large snifters. I handed one to her. She made a face and took a sip. The quality of the liquor overcame her temperance reflex. She drank some more. Things started looking up.

I quit getting dirty looks with each drink that I took. The alcohol proved a solvent that dissolved Beauty's priggish standoffishness. I must admit that she quit seeming as abhorrent to me as the alcohol fogged my brain.

I don't exactly remember going to bed, but I do remember awakening with a start. She was lying on her stomach wearing a nightgown with her arm draped over me. I felt really lousy, lousier than I had in years. I wormed my way out from under her arm and made my way to the next room to use the chamber pot. I was a little fuzzy from the alcohol.

In the bathroom I discovered something terrible.

My fur was gone! My fangs had shrunk to insignificance. My claws had withdrawn into hands; they were hands, not paws.

I wandered back to the bedroom in a daze.

A piercing scream shocked me out of that daze. I noticed that I was naked. Beauty was screaming. "Who are you? Get away from me."

"Beauty, it's me. I'm Beast."

She slowly calmed down. After a few minutes of me standing there like an idiot she looked me up and down. She seemed unimpressed. "What happened to your cute fur? And the rest of you?" Her gaze lingered a bit lower; disappointment showed plain on her face.

"It seems that your kiss must have released me from the enchantment," I deadpanned.

"You'd better get dressed."

"Right."

I went about the room and found my clothes. After the decades of my enchantment, they didn't quite fit. I put them on and felt a little foolish.

"Is that a Nehru jacket you're wearing?"

"Shut up."

The clothes were scratchy and uncomfortable. I'd gained weight and I had trouble getting my pants buttoned.

Beauty started looking around the castle. She started appraising the art on the walls, the quality of the furnishings, and the gold and silver table service.

"I'm staying."

I didn't really mind since I figured that now that my enchantment was over, I'd need a woman's touch around the castle. So I agreed.

Months went by and she never really had anything to do with me after that. She spent a lot of time buying things for the castle. Her father and two sisters moved in. This grew to be a hassle.

"Beauty, I can't really have all your family living here."

"Why not? It's not as if you're man enough to run this castle by yourself."

"And your tennis coach, Bjorn. He can't live in the castle, either."

"We'll see about that."

The next day a stranger came to the castle and handed me some legal papers. I read something I didn't understand about "palimony" and tore them up.

A few weeks later, the Sheriff served me with a court order to move out of my castle.

I went wandering in the Enchanted Forest. There wasn't any other place for me. The judge gave Beauty everything I owned. I came upon my old friends--the wolves. I cried out a greeting and ran into their midst. They snarled and chased me all the way back into town, and I've been hanging around here ever since.

* * *

The Fairy chuckled and shook her head slowly. "How long has that been?"

"Couple months. I'm working across the street at the blacksmith's shop. Sorry about the dirt. I just got off work. Tell you what: tomorrow's payday, I'll buy the drinks and you'll tell me your favorite Fairy tale." Beast got up to leave. He was a little unsteady on his feet. The Fairy sized him up. He'd bulked up working for the blacksmith and his shirt hung open at its topmost button. The guy had marvelous pecs.

"Hey, I got a better idea," Fairy said. "Come with me." She had a funny little smile on her lips. Something hungry rose in her eyes and that made Beast a little nervous when he saw it. But he shrugged and followed her out. She kept walking out of town until they were well within the Enchanted Forest.

"Look, over there!" Fairy cried.

"What?" Beast said turning.

"Rubberneck." With that, she whipped out a magic wand and started waving it all around.

"That was a childish--" Beast stopped mid-sentence. He felt all tingly and his skin began to itch. Slowly, his alcohol-fogged brain registered the sensations as something he'd experienced once before. Beast looked down at his hands and saw hair sprout from them as his finger nails thickened and sharpened into claws. His nose grew larger and his sense of smell suddenly grew more acute. He sniffed the air and smelled his favorite scent: A she-wolf on the prowl.

He looked, and where Fairy had stood, a randy she-Beast crouched on all fours before him. Beast realized what he had seen in the hungry look in Fairy's eyes.

"Why, hello!" Beast said, his fuzzy eyebrows provocatively framing a furry leer.

"You'll have to catch me, first," she said and bounded off.

Beast chased her deep into the Enchanted Forest, running with all of his might. The miles flew by and soon Beast found himself in a familiar part of the wood. He knew the territory very well and soon he'd cornered the she-Beast beside his old castle's wall.

"Caught you," Beast said, panting.

The she-Beast looked at him coyly through her eyelashes. "Let's have supper first. They should be nicely fattened up by now." She motioned toward the castle.

"Come to think of it, I forgot how much I've missed raw meat."

With that, Beast and she-Beast bounded over the castle wall and devoured Beauty, Bjorn, her Father, Sisters, and the Lawyer who just happened to be spending the night. Beast's old wolf pack heard the sound of the carnage and showed up in time to clean up the leftovers.

**THE END**

Continued from page 18

off oil and, presently, the robes were clean. He peeled the hastily formed chrysalis from his face, hands and feet and tossed them into the fire. Eventually they would melt into tiny shards of dark glass. Reaching for his staff, Ambylor started toward the mountains.

The cool scented breeze drifting down from the canyon soothed the stinging pain from the burns that had penetrated the chrysalis and the sacred robes. He looked at his hands. They were a bright pink. He sensed the burning tightness on his left cheek. Silently, Ambylor thanked Him Whose Name Was Too Sacred To Be Uttered for sparing him from the flame.

Markeeome, the great Roof of the Sleeping One's Tomb, jutted well into the misty clouds that perpetually clung to its glaciered peaks. Ambylor never tired of its beauty, especially now that he had escaped. He relished the perfumed air of the high forests that covered the foothills beneath Markeeome's grandeur. The summit broke momentarily through the clouds. It glowed in the amber of the waning day. Lillis, the evening star, shone bright in the deep emerald sky beyond. Twilight was at the doors.

At last Ambylor reached the Shrine. It thrust skyward, a polished slab of etched lavender marble topped with the sacred symbol of the double notched arrowhead. At the heart of the sacred symbol was the Eye of Power. It was a jewel of fathomless deep red, almost black. It slept. Ambylor removed his sandals and stepped across the circle of sixteen clear stones that surrounded the Shrine. For a moment his mind touched upon his memory of one of the murals in the Place of Hope. Sixteen stones of light led the way for a holy people's journey across an ancient firmament. The circle here was a reminder of them. Another memory was of the holy ground where he now stood--the holy ground of enlightenment across the journey of life's darknesses. The stones rekindled hope inside him. He laid his staff carefully on the ground and knelt.

An ovoid of lavender marble rested on a raised dais at the base of the arrowhead slab. A ring of gems encrusted the ovoid. Each jewel was of a different color--precious stones that represented the twelve sacred Warriors of the Great God. Ambylor touched each stone lightly with his hand in the ancient, sacred order. A moment later the sound of sliding rock opened a crack in the ovoid. It widened, revealing a secret compartment within.

Ambylor hesitated from looking within for he knew what he would find there. The prophecies were unmistakable on this point. Still, he hoped--against all eternity--that he would be wrong. At last, he raised his gaze to the compartment.

The cavity was circular. The small figure of a kneeling man rested at its exact center. It was Zorl, The Great, kneeling in service and humility. The image was no idol. It served only as a reminder that this was hallowed ground, and that humility must reign over the heart of any who should come here for instruction.

On either side of the figure, Ambylor should have found two sacred objects. The first was an orb of pure pluridium encrusted with fifteen stones about its girth, a star shaped sapphire at the top, and an engraved square at the bottom. The second artifact was a stone, roughly square and hewn from volcanic rock.

He sighed. It was as he knew it would be. The sacred objects were gone. So, these were the Days of Grief. Could the Shrine have been plundered, and the treasures taken into the skies by infidels?

It could not be!

Anticipation, joy, and fear churned within him. None knew the ancient tokens that would open the Shrine, save the Most High Noblemen of Zorl. One of them must have removed the objects. Ambylor tried to imagine who among his peers might have done such a thing, knowing the ancient

prophecies. More puzzling was why any of the Most High Noblemen would have taken the artifacts, knowing their vital need in the days ahead.

Ambylor struggled against a sudden stinging of tears. The depth of the implications penetrated him to the core. All the signs of the coming of the End Star of Grief were fulfilled--all, that is, except the prophecy of the martyrdom, and that could happen at any time.

A chill rippled through him. He dared not dwell upon the thought that had just flashed into his mind. But he could not keep himself from it. For the first time he saw what the fulfillment of the martyrdom prophecy might mean for himself. He and his son, Krylor, were diametrically opposed to each other. It was all too plausible that Krylor and he could be the ones that fulfilled the prophecy.

It terrified him.

Ambylor wrenched unsuccessfully at the thought. He recalled the words of the prophecy in a frantic hope that he might find some flaw in his own thinking. Hoping that the actual words would somehow release him from the awful possibility, he spoke the words of the prophecy aloud.

"'The Guardians shall rise in strength
The City to make bright!
The Martyr's son shall slay the same;
And call forth heaven's blight.'"

"'For Procyx shall, in purest blue,
Appear with holy song.
The stars shall die in awesome fright--
Till Zorl shall right all wrong.'"

"'The martyr's son shall slay the same' . . . . No! Please, no." Ambylor struggled against the notion. Surely, his own son Krylor could not be the one--the one who would kill his own father, making him a martyr and heralding the terrible days of grief--of Procyx's flood of ruin and destruction.

Ambylor wrestled the idea beneath a pall of revulsion. Yet, he could not deny the possibility. Mentally, he yanked himself up from self-pity and horror. Could he not change all that? Was the prophecy destined to be fulfilled, or might not the acts of the participants--if they were changed--alter the results?

He felt sure they could.

True, these were the days of darkness. Echion, the Dragon of Night, had long succeeded in holding back the great truths from the races of the galaxy. They stumbled in ignorance not knowing their true God. The times of renewal would come. They would come during the days of Grief. It was so written. But could not the renewals come without the griefs and terrors of the End Star? Must so many perish in bewildered terror?

If only the people would listen.

But they did not. If there was just a little more time, they might hear. Ambylor resolved to try everything in his power to avert even the slightest chance that he might suffer martyrdom at the hands of his own son. Not just to save his own life. That was only a remote concern--almost clinically remote. His greatest fears were for the countless lives that would be lost under the terrible, irre-

sistible power of the End Star. Finally, he feared the loss of his son's salvation.

"Zorl," Ambylor whispered after a time of quiet preparation. As he began his bold request, his voice quavered. In the midst of his anxiety, he felt a sudden surge of . . . rightness. Yes! Rightness, the appropriateness in addressing his Deity under the name of Zorl, something he had never done until this moment--had never dared to do, until he was sure of its propriety. Now he was sure. Then, as if in reply, reassurance flowed through him. It was right. His God was near. He had always been near. Ambylor knew it. He struggled beneath the deep devotion that threatened to push him to tears. "Oh, Great God. I pray unto Thee in the name of Zorl, for surely the Days of Grief are upon us. I see that they are here! Be not angry with me! Please, let it not be I . . ." then the true intent of his supplication blurted out, " . . . not my son! Not my little one! Please, Oh Great God of the Heavens--hear me! Please, Most Holy One. I beg Thee! Hear my plea." He waited for a moment, then looked up at the Stone of Power, waiting.

"He does not hear you, father."

Ambylor jumped, his heart pounding painfully. After a moment, he turned around slowly. Krylor stood against the sunset, his beard braided into six lengths and the hair of his head braided into seven. These were the symbols of rulership. His son drew his sword. His face was dark, almost imperceptible now in the growing night. It was at that instant Ambylor knew he would die. After a silent moment he turned again to gaze at the Stone of Power in the center of the Shrine above his head. It remained dark.

"I say he does not hear you. There is no Zorl. He exists only in the minds of children and old women . . ."

"Will you profane Him even in His holy place?" Ambylor hissed, turning halfway about again.

Silence.

"Zorl is dead, father. It is time you joined your people as a wise man, not a foolish frightener of children. Put him away, and you may join us as the city's Wizened."

"You would give me that which I already possess?" Ambylor asked his son after a pause. He turned his attention back to the Stone of Power. "Great Zorl, have mercy, I pray thee. Forgive him. He cannot see that he . . . that all are blinded by the false wisdom of the offworld men. He cannot see . . ."

Krylor stepped closer, crossing the ring of stones with little regard for the reverence he had once held for them long years earlier. Ambylor heard other footsteps. The Hunters from the Outer City closed into a circle around him and the Shrine. Adrenaline surged into his chest. His heart pounded within. He bowed deeply forward, hands clasped, seeking to conceal that they were shaking.

Zorl, he cried out in his mind, let my son see the truth! I pray Thee! This may yet be averted if Thou wilt soften his heart that he does not strike me dead. Please, cannot the ways be changed--the destruction of worlds be averted by one, single act?

"Stop this, father. It is foolishness to bow to a dead God."

Ambylor listened, straining to hear the voice of Zorl within him, but heard only the outward murmurings of the twilight. He took a deep breath and climbed to his feet.

Krylor made a speech for the benefit of the Hunters: "The time has come for the people of Mhyrn to leave the foolish traditions of their fathers and join the men from the stars who come telling of endless worlds and riches and power. None of them know of Zorl."

"Can you not see what you are doing?" Ambylor whirled upon him. "Think upon the prophe-

cies!"

"I do not wish to harm you, father. But know this--I will strike you down, if I must, that the people may know that the prophecies are only the foolish traditions of superstitious old men who invented them to hold their power against the young and the strong." He shouted up to the heavens, "I call upon you, Zorl, to watch. I defy You. If I must, I, myself, shall fulfill the prophecy of the martyrdom--as you know I can!"

Only the sound of the night breeze answered. Krylor shrugged, confident. "You see, father. The old ways are gone. Only you keep them alive."

"I, and the other Most High Noblemen. There are more of us than you may think."

"All are dead now save only you and Echktalor, and we will soon have him."

Ambylor thought again of the Place of Hope. Echktalor hid there. If all the others were dead, then his friend should be safe. None but the Most High Noblemen knew its location.

"Killing me will not do away with the ancient prophecies or the powers that wait to be loosed upon the universe. You know the signs and prophecies. Can't you see what is happening now? Father and son, one a Most High Nobleman and the son who intends to kill him?"

Krylor hesitated for a moment. Ambylor thought he saw in his son's eyes the gentleness of the child he had loved and held; the son to whom he had taught the most sacred traditions. "Don't force the prophecy. Everything is in place for Procyx to appear! Son! Think!"

Krylor looked away for a moment.

"This is the sign. If you slay me, then Procyx will come this very night! Do not bring death upon the universe!"

His son wrenched his face up, defiant. "You will not lie any further! I swear I will slay you this instant to show these that all this is foolishness! I mean to lift our people to the stars, father, and no one will block me from this--not even you. Do not tempt me!"

Ambylor bowed his head. For a full minute he struggled within himself. By giving into his son's demands, he might block the prophecy. Could he forestall the coming of the End Star of Grief by simply capitulating? He almost gave in. He could not bear to think of the living hell his son would have to endure among the people should he kill his father, let alone the reckoning he must have with God at the Last Day.

Ambylor spoke evenly, trying to make his son understand. "Even if you kill all of us, you will gain nothing. The ancient laws and traditions will live on, vital against the day of the End Star of Grief. The times of renewal shall come. Only they can save . . ."

"I say silence!" Krylor screamed. "I will hear no more of this!"

Ambylor struggled to calm himself, "Do you forget that it was under my hand that you assumed the Guardianship over the Outer City?"

"I have not forgotten," Krylor said softly, even gently. "It is for this reason I come to you now, alone and away from the people . . . ."

"Alone?" Ambylor's voice had sudden power. He gazed around him at the Hunters. Their swords flashed cold green from the sky. They all started. Ambylor felt power flood through him. Silently, he gave a prayer of thanks for the strength Zorl had now given him.

Krylor recovered quickly, "These share my resolution."

"Don't you fear that I might unleash the Golden Death rather than have you destroy the Faith?" Ambylor hated himself for resorting to threats to stop the prophecy, but he knew he must try everything he could to avert the coming of the Procyx.

Several of the Hunters shifted uneasily. Krylor glared at them, raising his sword in the ges-

ture of authority that was his as Guardian. Reluctantly, they stepped closer, yet still beyond the ring of sacred stones. Krylor turned back to his father.

"The Golden Death has never been seen," his voice was lower than before, not so brash and confident. "Only spoken of in corners."

"Of course! This is because it is sacred, not because it is an empty threat!"

There was a pause. "I do not believe it exists."

"Your belief is not needed for its existence, only mine is important. Do not tempt me, Krylor. The Golden Death is real--irresistible, and I have the power."

The angle of Krylor's sword dropped ever so slightly. Ambylor looked around at the Hunters, searching their expressions in the dusk. He found one face, that of a strapping youth newly come of age, whose eyes he could clearly read. Ambylor locked his gaze unwaveringly upon the youth's. After a moment, the boy put his sword back in his scabbard.

"Wexior," Krylor yelled. "Draw your sword!"

But Wexior only bowed his head. "Holy One, I pray forgiveness." With that he turned and walked off, head bent, until his youthful form was lost among the darkening webs of the table trees. One by one, the majority of the Hunters followed, sheathing their swords. Some knelt and prayed. Most simply walked into the shadowed silence of the forest.

Krylor gazed after them for long moments, listening for even one pair of returning feet or the sound of one sword being redrawn. But there was nothing. At last he turned to Ambylor.

"Go home now, Krylor. I shall not contest your rulership."

"Will you also return to spread your lies among us?"

"You know the answer to that," Ambylor said, turning to kneel once more before the Shrine. He listened--hoping--praying for Krylor's departure, but heard only the silence of the night. Kneeling upon the ground, Ambylor took a deep breath.

The time was at hand.

He lifted his eyes to the Stone of Power in the Shrine. Somehow, now that martyrdom stood so near, he felt calm.

"Zorl! I beseech Thee . . ."

A golden beam shot out of the large jewel. It bathed Ambylor's face in its dazzling, coherent brilliance.

"Forgive my son for that which he is about to do."

It was then that Krylor thrust the sword into Ambylor's spine.

The golden beam collapsed in upon itself, flickering out like the snuffed flame of a candle smothering in the wax. Ambylor fell forward, his face smacking into the dust. His son removed the sword with a jerk. Then, with a curious gentleness, Krylor turned his Ambylor over, resting him on his back.

"Why couldn't you give in?" Krylor said quietly after a moment. He did not look into his father's dazed eyes; perhaps could not. But Ambylor could see that his son's eyes were swollen with tears. "You never move! Never! Curse you," he clutched Ambylor to him roughly. He shuddered for a moment. Then, regaining a measure of composure, he carefully lowered Ambylor back to the ground.

"I struck true, father. There will be little pain."

Ambylor struggled to move but could only turn his head. There was a searing pain just at the base of his neck, but below that, only numbness.

"Death will release you soon," Krylor rested Ambylor's head against the base of the Shrine.

But the Most High Nobleman gazed past the dark shape of his son at the heavens, waiting. Krylor looked up as well, hesitantly, then all about him.

"You see, father? Nothing. All for nothing. Zorl is dead."

Ambylor waited silent in a swirl of pain and numbness. For a time he could hardly see the stars. The dark shape of Krylor arranged Ambylor's numb arms in the classic pose of honor. At last he stepped back and Ambylor saw the stars.

"So--Procyx," he whispered. "Great Eye of Grief and Darkness! Now you will come, won't you? You will have your way." Through his labored breathing, he prayed, "Great God, whose name is most holy to be uttered--Please! Forgive my son. I beg Thee!"

Choking and gasping, Krylor struggled, once more, against his tears.

"Receive me, though I am not worthy of Thee, great God of all Heavens," Ambylor whispered. "Take me into Thy bosom, Creator of all things."

Suddenly, from within the Shrine, a single pure note of music sounded. It was clear, exquisite, like the rubbing of the rim of a fine crystal goblet with a wetted fingertip. Ambylor gasped weakly, for above him a single, rich point of light appeared exactly where he gazed. It brightened with the passing of each moment, shining with the purest, richest blue Ambylor had ever seen. It blossomed brighter than ten moons, illuminating both the forest and Krylor.

Krylor the Guardian turned. Gazing up at the light, his face contorted into fear. He fell to his knees, shouting at Ambylor like a man possessed. "Father, no! What have I done?! Dear God, no!"

Ambylor tried to move again, to take Krylor in his arms as he had years ago when his son had believed. But it was too late.

Immersed in a bittersweet joy that somehow transcended all his fears, sorrows, and frustrations, the Holy Man gave himself over to death.

Krylor sobbed openly, pounding on Ambylor's chest. The martyr started to speak but...

# CHAPTER ONE
## Ahrgol

Colonel Martin Palmer clutched at his head as if clawing to reach his biotranz. Abruptly, the library's computer broke connection with him and Krylor's frantic pounding evaporated. The searing blue of Procyx dimmed, the skies of Mhyrn faded, and Palmer found himself lying in his own perspiration.

Where was he?

He felt the simulacron couch beneath him. Lights faded up around him. Oh yes, a reading room within the main library of the Federation's capitol on Ahrgol. Free of the actual simulation, Palmer still reeled beneath a diverse barrage of emotions, both his own and the superimposition of Ambylor's. His head throbbed.

A death simulation was always dangerous, even one so editorialized as was this one. With a rueful smile he recalled the simulacron's carefully worded disclaimer. Normally, Palmer avoided all simulacron experiences. The emotional strain was always intense, and certain simulacron types could be addicting. Only Palmer's security clearance had allowed him to access this file at all.

"Would you like an RNA implant of the files you have just experienced?" the computer asked him casually.

"Just a minute," Palmer said swallowing down a taste of nausea. He really shouldn't have taken on a simulacron. Already he was lightheaded from lack of sleep and was growing more short-tempered. Still, living the simulacron of the Martyrdom of Ambylor, the Resolute, had accomplished what he had hoped. He now possessed a clear Mhyrnian perspective of the terrible End Star the Mhyrnians called Procyx; specifically, the Eye of the Procyx. For that understanding, Palmer was grateful. He had had no idea how prominently the Procyx prophecies figured into their culture.

**Ahrgol** - click image for a larger view

Was Procyx responsible for the deaths of worlds or wasn't it? Not for the first time did Palmer believe himself as obsessed with Procyx as the Mhyrnians. Finding the answer and maybe a solution had been a quest that had seriously threatened both his mar-

riage and his career on more than one occasion.

He cast the thought away, stretched hard, and then settled back into the softness of the recliner. He gazed at his reflection in the mirror-smooth ceiling of the library.

He rubbed at a week's growth of beard on his chin. Palmer saw himself a tired, haggard Federation officer with graying temples. His blue and white uniform was badly wrinkled. Dark circles beneath his eyes made them more deep-set than they were, and he was only thirty-two years old.

He had intended to give himself a real opportunity for actual rest, the first in two weeks. The deserted library was quiet. He really had tried to sleep but spent nearly an hour tossing. For years he had gleaned data from a dozen other doomed worlds before this one. What if there were something unique in this library that might help him better understand Procyx or the incredible peril in which he and trillions found themselves.

He had tried to sleep, but the old, nagging concerns worked their way up to the front of his mind. He could not shrug them off. Even FedComm's best relaxation techniques had failed him. Finally he had gotten up, gone to the index, and entered his usual key words for a Procyx-related search. Near passionate excitement claimed him when he had discovered the Ambylor simulacron.

So, was this Mhyrnian End Star of Grief truly linked to the unexplained destruction of thousands of star systems, or some fantastic coincidence? Palmer brooded. The insight he had gained from this simulacron had been worth the exhaustion. It had also been an ordeal. Sleep finally took its toll.

He dreamed. He was back home, thousands of light-years away.

"Oh, Martin!" his wife scolded him. "Give it a rest! I'm sick to death of Procyx this and Procyx that! There's nothing you can do! Can't you see that? Just stop!" The edge of her voice softened just a degree. "Now come up here and do something else! I don't care what it is as long as it doesn't have anything to do with this stupid Procyx!"

He climbed the stairs to their bedroom. His wife stood at the threshold wearing a negligee. Between thumb and forefinger she held a blazing, blue star --Procyx.

Palmer jumped out of his seat.

"Are you well, Colonel?" The computer asked softly.

"Fine," he rubbed at the back of his neck.

"Would you care for an RNA implant of the Ambylor files?"

Palmer took a deep breath and said, "Yes." A small capsule and cup of water appeared at an aperture in the left armrest. Palmer picked them up and swallowed the pill effortlessly. He settled back into the lounger and closed his eyes.

His eyes hurt and his pulse drummed in his ears. This brief nap had deepened his headache to a killer. "Great." He got up and walked across the room to the wide windows. Gazing out into the Ahrgol's night, he tranzed Ensign Davis down in Lobby. She was monitoring routine deep space communications.

"Evanna," he spoke inside his head to her.

"Colonel," she tranzed back. "I thought you were asleep."

"I actually was, for a bit," he tranzed back. "It's too hard for me to relax much until I know everyone's safely off planet."

"Yes, Sir."

"I can't shake the feeling we've missed someone. It gets really bad every time, just before we

leave a world. I know we've got the best scan satellites FedComm has, but I just can't help thinking there's some poor soul somewhere who doesn't know the planet's going to die. He'll go merrily on his way until the sky falls on him."

Palmer paused, listening to the silence of Evanna listening to him, and cursed himself. That was the great fear they all shared. In the whole galaxy now, there wasn't anyone who didn't at least know someone who had died from planetary ruin, or lost homes from it in narrow escapes. He lightened up and pumped some cheerfulness into his next tranz. "Listen, I don't suppose you could get a personal through, could you, to my wife, Arrleen? She's in the Shire Sector."

"I've been trying all night to get personals through. Waiting for the end of the world is tough duty. Everyone wants to call home."

Palmer laughed. Evanna went on, "The integrals are jammed with refugees calling relatives. I'll keep trying, though."

"That's okay," Palmer sighed. "I just . . ." his tranz fell away. Evanna did not answer him.

"Yeah," Palmer muttered. He rubbed at his forehead cursing, thinking. What had he been able to uncover about Procyx? It wasn't much, probably because there wasn't much anyone had been able to learn.

The string of unexplained disasters that now beset so many sectors of the galaxy had seemed to commence within a year of Procyx's appearance, some 357 years ago. Procyx itself was an incomprehensible enigma. It seemed to be a brilliant star that radiated only a single frequency of pure, blue light. Seen from a distance, it looked like the pinpoint brilliance a laser creates when reflected off a white surface. Because it shone coherent light, there was no spectrum to study. Scientists could discover nothing about it. Officially, they could find no measurable connection between Procyx and the coincidental destructions. Circumstantially, the two seemed inseparable.

The massive scale of planetary and stellar deaths was appalling. The mysterious phenomenon of destruction linked to Procyx had been dubbed Hypermotility. Whole star systems fell to its ruin on a daily, sometimes hourly basis. To a world suffering from Hypermotility, it was as though the laws of nature were somehow perverted.

Such disasters eluded explanation. Palmer shook his head. One enigma must be causing the other, but which was the cause and which the effect? Did Procyx cause Hypermotility or did Hypermotility cause Procyx? Maybe Procyx was merely a side effect of some unidentified force that caused them both.

Beyond the windows, the night of Ahrgol was exquisite. Computer systems faithfully lit the deserted city against the dark. Rose lights bathed the massive building complex nicknamed Stonehenge. Even the grav fountains continued churning dynamic geysers a kilometer into the air. They glowed in shifting waves of color as native water microbes spoke unknown spectral tongues among themselves.

The eastern horizon blistered in the faint blues of first light. The sky was cloudless. The ghosts of dead stars shone brilliantly. Hypermotility had dissolved them, novaed or collapsed them into lightless gravity wells. Of these, only dark storms of gamma-irradiated particles remained. All the stars of the Sector were gone--all but Ahrgol's sun and the sun of Mhyrn. It would be another century before the skies here were filled with the darkness of galactic death--a death already past, but not yet seen light years away. No one would be here to see it; Ahrgol itself would be gone.

Palmer glanced down at the parkway beneath the library. Two security guards stood at casual alert. Floating portastrobes made pools of rose light for them to stand in. They carried phasetron rifles and deep space commceivers. If things got too busy for Evanna to handle, they could alert

Palmer immediately. He lost interest and looked back toward Stonehenge again, wondering how long it would be before Hypermotility struck this beautiful world down to destruction--days, hours, minutes?

Ahrgol was the last remaining Federation world of the Sector--the seat of government for two hundred planets, all gone in oblivion. Of the hundreds of thousands of military once serving here, Palmer commanded a mere handful. Specialists worked in small groups scattered across the once bustling Federation Command base. The sprawling Fleet Complex lay just beyond the city limits. Its only function now was that of emergency port of call. Occasionally, lagging starships stopped there. Most had already escaped other ruined worlds to safer regions of the galaxy.

"Safer regions," Palmer mused. Were there any really? So far, scientists could classify only the various types of Hypermotility. That had led to a way to predict likely targets for immediate or imminent stellar death. While their accuracy had been good, their predictions were based solely on statistics; and there were planets incredibly close to Procyx that defied the numbers--planets like Mhyrn. According to the theories, Mhyrn should have gone down to ruin centuries ago. Yet, the ancient world stood. Its culture flourished and the Mhyrnians scornfully defied all Federation suggestions to leave.

Ahrgol itself was nearly evacuated. According to the numbers, the end of Ahrgol should reveal itself shortly. When it came, there would be only hours available for escape. While Palmer and his staff were all that remained of Federation personnel, there were still some natives who refused to go. Palmer worried over them, though legally he was free of responsibility. They had officially logged their refusal to evacuate. Once they had done that, these few remaining Ahrgolians could not be forced to leave. And Palmer knew--he knew from his own experience that when the end came they would want to live. But it would be too late.

He stretched, turned and walked back to the lounger.

"Okay," he opened the Procyx files again. "Let's try to look at things differently--diverge from the obvious. Come on, Martin." At the completion of each entry he found nothing to dissuade him. Procyx had to be linked to the destruction of the galaxy. He just couldn't prove it.

But what about the Ambylor file? There was no science there, unless the Mhyrnians knew something about Procyx they weren't telling anyone. What if the proof of connection between Procyx and Hypermotility could be found on Mhyrn itself? If the Mhyrnians did know about a connection beyond the mythology, might they also know of some way to counteract the effects of Hypermotility? If they did, no one from the Federation would ever find out. Mhyrn would have nothing to do with them, even when trillions of lives hung in the balance.

"What time is it?" Palmer asked the library.

"Oh-five fifty-two," it replied. Palmer wondered how Lieutenant Cosgrove's efforts were going with the last of the Ahrgolians. Palmer's aid had left nearly a day ago, pleading for an audience with the Ahrgolian High Council. They must have made him wait. By carriage, the village was only half an hour away, and Cosgrove had not returned.

A sound stirred. Palmer looked down the room at the door. Nothing. The sound came again. He went to the window. Dawn had captured the eastern horizon. It glowed with pinks and silver-oranges. The security guards were still there, but now a carriage parked just to the side of them.

"Cogs," Palmer said. He started toward the door when it opened. Frank Cosgrove looked nearly as haggard as Palmer. "Come in--sit down. Tell me how it went."

"Thanks, Colonel." Cosgrove found the nearest contour lounger and flopped into it. "Hill was right. The natives are crazy. They still refuse to go."

"You did talk to the High Council?"

"I talked and they listened. Then they threw me out, chanting things about Zorl, and Echion, and Procyx. The only one who didn't join in the chorus was the head mystic. He only stared at me, but his expression could fuse iron."

"Head mystic?" Palmer said, picking up on the references to Procyx. "He wasn't Ahrgolian, was he?"

Cosgrove looked astonished, "Why no, Colonel--he was Mhyrnian. How'd you know?"

"Just a hunch. Zorl worshipers don't usually get that caught up in their religion unless there's a Mhyrnian in charge."

"Well, it was a surprise to me," Cosgrove sat back, closing his eyes. "I thought no Mhyrnian would ever set foot on a Fed planet of his own choosing." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"There is room for them on the ferryship that's coming," Palmer said. "I made sure of that." Cosgrove opened bleary eyes to look at him, then shook his head.

"Won't make any difference, Colonel." He kept shaking his head. "Morons! You should have seen them. We've got a better chance at shooting Procyx out with a bean shooter than we have evacuating that lot. Fanatical fools."

"When's the ferryship due?"

"Oh-eight forty-two hours," Palmer said.

There was a pause.

Palmer thought back on the simulacron. Then, as if a light went on in his head, he decided to play a hunch. "The head mystic--the Mhyrnian. Know anything about him?"

"He's been running the show here for about twenty years now. Let me tell you, if he so much as sweats, Ahrgolians hop over each other to wipe his brow."

"Twenty years," Palmer echoed. The simulacron burned in his memory. Its emotions threatened to overcome him. For the first time in his life, Palmer thought he could talk to a Mhyrnian about Procyx with some degree of intelligence. "Cogs, is there any chance you can bring that shaman here?"

"The Mhyrnian? Why?"

"I want to try talking with him myself."

"You? I mean, sure, Colonel. I'll give it a try. But I think it's a waste of time, our being Federation people and all. I don't even think he'll come, let alone talk."

"Try to get him anyway. Take Van Goff, Hill and Lucas. They're down on level four."

Cosgrove pulled himself from the lounger with a grunt. "Okay, Colonel. But I'll bet a month's salary he won't come."

"Give it your best shot," Palmer said, and Cosgrove smiled a little--a smile of resignation. "Thanks," Palmer added and Cosgrove left.

Palmer instructed the library to lock the door, then went to the lounger Cosgrove had rested in. He had to try to get some sleep. He leaned back, loosening the neck clasps of his uniform and stretched out. The sun was an hour from rising. It would be at least an hour before Cosgrove and the others returned--just enough time to comfortably slip down into the dream cycle. He needed to dream badly, but not about Procyx. Lack of dreams could alter personality, and he knew he had hardly been civil these last few days. His incivility stemmed from lack of sleep, he convinced himself, then smiled. "No sleep, no dreams, idiot! So what do you expect?" And that was the last coherent thought Palmer had.

Why didn't that chiming stop? And who was shining that bright light at him? All at once Palmer was awake. He rubbed his eyes and came off the lounger trying to straighten his hair without the aid of a mirror. He attempted smoothing the wrinkles from his uniform then told the library to unlock the door. A moment later it opened.

Standing just beyond the entrance were Cosgrove, Van Goff and a man, two meters tall, wearing robes of iridescent crimson. The cloth looked as though it was made from scattered laser light, something he had never seen anywhere in the Federation. Whatever technology was used to create this cloth excelled anything the Federation had.

The shaman's olive skin was tinted with a trace of lavender. His face wore striking, chiseled features: thin lips held tight in disdain, a narrow, regular nose, and commanding, clear eyes with irises of pure purple. That characteristic high forehead of all Mhyrnians rose above woolly brows and ended with a cap of cloud-white hair, marking racial purity. His hands must have been clasped behind his back. The looming shaman gazed down at Palmer like a statue. His narrowed, purple eyes glared contempt and, perhaps, revulsion. This would be tough.

"Thank you, gentlemen," Palmer said, gesturing for the Mhyrnian to enter. After a moment, the shaman did. Van Goff followed him, his hand never far from his depolarizer. Palmer caught his eye and shook his head. Van Goff took his hand away.

"Lieutenant Cosgrove, stay with us please. Lieutenant Van Goff, you're dismissed." Van Goff gazed long at the Mhyrnian before saluting, then turned and left. The door closed behind him. Cosgrove moved off to the side, folding his arms and leaning against the window through which the sun of Ahrgol shone in pale, gold light. The Mhyrnian continued to stare at Palmer, tight-lipped and motionless.

"I thank you for coming," Palmer said. "I realize that this is an inconvenience, but these are dangerous times now and the planet may fall into ruin at any moment."

Silence.

"I am Colonel Martin Palmer of the Federation Emergency Force. We are here to assist you in evacuating your people, though I am told that you do not want to leave."

"I can never return home, so there is no reason to leave. I, and my followers, will stay here."

The Mhyrnian's voice was deep and resonant. His diction was clear with just the slightest accent. Palmer sensed tremendous self-mastery and power in this man.

"May I ask your name, please?"

There was more silence.

"His name is Gaultor, Colonel."

"Gaultor," Palmer nodded once. "Greetings, Gaultor. I know that your people choose their names with care, often selecting them for their liturgical significance. What does Gaultor mean?

"It means Holy Man from a Distant Heaven," Cosgrove replied after it became obvious that the Mhyrnian would not. "The villagers told me what it meant, as if it were of unusual significance."

"I'm sure it must have great significance," Palmer said, watching the Mhyrnian's face. More silence.

"Gaultor, how long have you been here on Ahrgol?" Palmer asked. The Mhyrnian closed his eyes. It appeared that Gaultor considered the conversation ended. He had stated what he assumed he had been brought here to say and was closing himself to further dialogue. Now, he would merely wait for Palmer to tire and send him back to his followers. But Palmer would not be put off so easily. He thought for a moment.

"I have just finished studying the martyrdom of Ambylor, the Resolute. I now realize, to some small extent, the importance of Procyx to your people. Would you care to enlighten me further? I desire to understand all I can about Procyx." Palmer spoke carefully, controlling his voice to carry no hint of judgment nor ridicule. After a moment, Gaultor opened his eyes. He stared at Palmer with the intensity of a determined child that can turn the gaze of an adult. Suddenly, the intensity diminished and the shaman's expression relaxed. With a face braced for harassment, Gaultor spoke.

"These are the days of the End Star of Grief. Ambylor was slain because of the lies of Federationists who invaded my world. Does the Federation Colonel now wish to further humiliate and degrade that which is most precious and sacred to Mhyrnians?"

"I do not, sir," Palmer forced his body language to reflect relaxation, though inwardly he was burning with defensiveness. After a moment he added, "The safety of you and your followers is my concern and the concern of those who work with me."

"All I have seen of Federationists is death and enslavement of Mhyrnians."

"I wish I could say that this was not so. I am ashamed to admit that you speak the truth," Palmer said softly, reflecting a moment on the history of the Federation's dealings with Mhyrn. It was a bloody history he had learned well in his studies of Procyx. He could understand this man's attitude. Still, he carefully posed his next question, praying that every word would be free of threat. "Does Gaultor know truth and wisdom?"

"Wisdom is most rare among mortals. What more am I than mortal?"

"To lead well requires wisdom. Are you not the leader of the Ahrgolians who remain?"

Gaultor lowered his head. Palmer saw in the Mhyrnian the willingness to entertain the possibility that Palmer had only called him here out of a sense of concern for his people. Palmer's admission that the Federation had dealt poorly with the Mhyrnians must have been a shock. Palmer wondered if any other Federation citizen had ever said anything of the sort to this man. He sighed. The admission and apology were long overdue. Palmer had an unusual advantage to begin to heal those wounds now, for on Ahrgol, he was legally the governor of the Sector--the arm of Federation power and policy. The significance of that fact must not have escaped this Mhyrnian.

"I officially apologize, with deep grief and contrition, for the wrongs of my countrymen against your people."

The Mhyrnian regarded him with confusion.

"I am no fool in this." Palmer went on, "I understand that a mere apology can never be enough, but that is all I can offer at this time. I pray you accept it, insufficient though it is. Gaultor, you must understand--the Federation is here neither to command you nor coerce your people. You are the leader here. Surely, you must wish what is best for them. It is my desire . . ." Palmer struggled, looking for the right words to say. " . . . Gaultor, I . . . we wish for that which is best for all men."

Gaultor's face suddenly flushed lavender, "How dare the Federation Colonel utter such words. Thousands of my people were slaughtered under the hands of your criminal military forces! Women were raped, children maimed, and the old kicked to death before the eyes of their little ones! How can you speak of wishing the best for all men? I marvel that Zorl does not strike this world with ruin this very instant at the searing desecration of your lying words. He may yet destroy all. This universe is ripe for destruction, so great are the atrocities of your people against the followers of Zorl!"

Palmer struggled to let this burning insult subside within him. He became dizzy for an

instant, his joints and limbs aching with unspent adrenaline. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Cosgrove poised ready for a fight. Palmer must reclaim some sense of peace here. He must convince the Mhyrnian that he was sincere. The words came hard to him.

"What you say is true. I cannot deny it. I am ashamed. I repeat again my admission that many terrible things were done to your people by men evil beyond all moral standards. These were men of terrible power--too much power. Greed drove reason and morality from them. I do not excuse their actions regardless of their motives, but may I point out that the Federation removed and punished them when the truth was revealed." He paused to let the words sink in. "Sir, I ask you to consider this: Are all Federation citizens evil? Aren't there good as well as evil individuals among all races and peoples?"

Gaultor was silent, but some of the color in his face seemed to diminish.

"The Federation," Palmer continued, "has also done good for races. You rule a people not of your home world. Ask them. Did not the Federation bring healing arts to them; feed them, teach them excellent methods of growing food and ways to live so that their children would not die from disease?"

There was a pause.

"As you did in the early days with my people."

Palmer looked down, searching for the right words. "It was the pluridium, Gaultor. Of all things it is rarest in the universe. When it was discovered on Mhyrn, the Federation people there became wealthy beyond their dreams. But even with such tremendous prosperity and power it was not enough for them, was it? Their greed drove them to do terrible things. I have already said that. Sir--this has not happened here. The Federation respects the native Ahrgolians. It encouraged them to continue with their national and world orders, autonomous and free while protecting them until . . ."

"But this is their world, Federation Colonel. Your people claim part of it for your own. You have thus taken that which is precious from the people here as well, have you not?"

Palmer had no reply for this. True, the Federation built its cities only in areas where no Ahrgolians chose to live, such as with this base. It resided on one of Ahrgol's worst deserts. Federation technology had made it an oasis. The Federation policy was one of protectionism against terrorists and the outlaw combines that could conquer an entire planet unless it was protected. The Federation had established a military installation here to protect the Ahrgolians until they could achieve complete technological independence. At least that was the theory. But Gaultor was right. In essence, the Federation had taken part of this world to itself.

At last, he said, "Would you have us leave you here with the threat of world destruction hanging over you? Once we leave there is no rescue possible. Those who live outside the Federation's laws, who live by robbery and plunder, might well come in and take what they choose, killing your people or taking them away to slavery. It has happened on other worlds. Gaultor, I humbly ask of you--please think of the safety of the people you rule. I invite you to look beyond our differences for the moment. We are offering you safe passage off this planet with no strings attached. Please, sir. At least offer your people the choice of leaving without stating your own personal feelings on the matter. Let them choose their own fate."

"They are as my children, Federation Colonel. Where they are I must go also. I would not leave them, and I will go to no Federation world."

Out of the corner of his eye, Palmer saw Cosgrove shaking his head. He stood behind the Mhyrnian so Gaultor could not see him. Palmer looked at the Mhyrnian again.

"If you could choose another world, I would see to it that you would be taken there--you and your followers. Name the world."

"You could not take me there, for I would go home."

Gaultor was right. Of all worlds to which he might take Gaultor and his followers, Mhyrn was the one to which no Federation ship could ever safely go. There were no longer any diplomatic relations between Mhyrn and the Federation. Vastly wealthy from pluridium, the Mhyrnians had purchased a fleet of starships easily powerful enough to discourage any possible contention. An unwanted ship entering the Mhyrn system would be quickly destroyed.

"Gaultor, all we want is this: let those who wish to leave do so. That is all we want."

Gaultor stood in silence for several minutes. At last he looked at Palmer. "I will tell them to make the choice."

Palmer drew a silent breath, nodding slightly. "I thank you for your decision, Gaultor. I do not know as much of your beliefs as I wish I did, but I do know what you think of the Creator. He teaches love, does he not? I believe that he would be pleased with this decision."

The moment Palmer had said this he cursed himself for being so presumptuous. He began searching for the right way to express an apology that wouldn't look contrived, but the words were said. He steeled himself for the rage Gaultor would surely unleash on him.

"You speak of Zorl without knowing sacred things," Gaultor began. Here it comes, Martin thought with dread. "Yet, you do not deride Him. How is this so?"

Palmer let his breath escape soundlessly. Apparently, Gaultor was astonished by even this small concession on Palmer's part. He chose his words carefully, hoping not to cross any taboos.

"I know that Zorl is the Father of all heavens." Palmer thought back on that Mhyrnian prayer concerning Procyx. "I know that Echion the Dark performed terrible deeds that caused him to be cast out to the far heavens. I know that Procyx is Echion's eye, gazing upon the universe before Zorl either destroys or saves it. That part is unclear to me, that Zorl may either destroy the universe or save it. Beyond that I know that Zorl loves his children--that Mhyrnians are his children, and that Zorl will spare the righteous among them no matter what happens to the universe. Is this correct?"

Gaultor's gaze had that quality of strength that tore at Palmer again. He looked down for an instant only to force his eyes to look again upon the Mhyrnian.

"Why do you not deride Zorl as do other Federationists?" Gaultor asked again, a softening in his voice.

"Though I do not understand all about your faith, I see its beauty. It is wrong to humiliate anything of beauty. That is something I believe."

Pause.

"Why should I believe you?" Gaultor's voice was not harsh, but cautious. "All others of the Federation have lied to my people. Why should I believe you now?"

"What have I to gain by lying? This is not Mhyrn. There is no pluridium here, and I cannot rob from your world. I can gain nothing. I merely wish to save lives. I hope that you can see that, and I hope that even you will consider coming with us before this world falls to ruin."

Gaultor seemed to consider this for a time. He looked at Palmer. "Where would I go?"

"Consider that the Serenity Sector is independent from the Federation. The artisans there love all things beautiful. They would respect your beliefs and leave you alone, if you wished. I know that arrangements could be made . . ."

"Not to go home--that is the only place where there will be safety. My followers would be welcome there, and I have a work to perform among my own kind. I don't know--if I leave this

world, it must be to go home, or I shall stay to meet the Creator when he sends destruction here. I don't think I can leave."

"But your followers--you will give them freedom to leave if they so desire?"

Gaultor nodded once.

Palmer bowed slightly in return, then looked at Cosgrove. "Lieutenant, tell Hill to prepare the shuttle for passengers. Escort Gaultor back to his people. Wait there for any who wish to accompany us off-world when the ferryship arrives." Then to Gaultor he said, "Thank you, Gaultor."

The Mhyrnian unclasped his hands from behind his back, relaxing for the first time since he had arrived. He looked at Cosgrove.

"Shall we go?" Cosgrove asked and Gaultor nodded.

As they were leaving, Gaultor turned to Palmer one last time, "You are different, Federation Colonel." Gaultor turned away, moving as though he was floating, not walking.

Palmer sat down in the lounger again, reviewing the conversation he just had with the Mhyrnian. He could not explain it, but Gaultor commanded respect at first sight. It wasn't merely his appearance: his impossibly pure red robes; his broad, tall stature; his penetrating eyes, though these served to heighten the effect. No, there was something beneath all that which was elusive but real: a power bridled by wisdom and restraint. It was unlike anything Palmer had ever experienced, except in the Serenity cluster where the great artisans resided with their super-artistic masterpieces. Palmer felt that Gaultor had that same wisdom and hidden power possessed by the artisans of Serenity, however clouded by outrage.

Outside, the shuttle prepared for liftoff. It roared to full power. A moment later it lifted. The whine of its engines dopplered into the distance until there was silence again.

"Colonel," Evanna tranzed him. "The ferryship is on final approach. It's coming in on the far side of the planet. We should have touchdown in about twenty minutes."

"About time," Palmer tranzed back. "Pass the word to everyone--start gathering things up to leave. Oh, and put in a special call to the science teams. I know they'll drag their feet. They always do."

"Got it, Colonel," Evanna replied.

At last, Palmer could relax. A great burden had lifted from him. He had made the extra effort, and it looked like it might succeed. He had even come close to convincing Gaultor himself to come along. With the ferryship on final approach, he could have the world vacated by nightfall, easily. They would be off this doomed planet and into safer regions of galactic space before the week was out. Palmer could finally go home to Arrleen for a while. He was due to be rotated off active duty after clearing Ahrgol. He was entitled to as much as two years vacation if he wanted. He decided he would take it. For a while, at least, he could put all thoughts of Procyx and disaster out of his mind and take in the sun . . .

The sun! Palmer lurched forward, looking outside. It was shining on the eastern mountains from low in the western sky. He glanced at his timepiece. It read oh-nine hundred hours and was still running, but the shadows and angle of the sun said it should be sixteen hundred hours.

From outside, the dreaded wail of sirens climbed in screeching alarm. A gust of wind slammed against the windows of the library making them rattle. Palmer was on his feet, staring out the window at the inevitable impossibility.

"Colonel," Evanna tranzed him, her thoughts edged with fear. "It's started--Hypermotility! We're in Hypermotility!"

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go in," he said, nodding towards the fortress of Landmoor.

Dujahn turned his horse around and spurred it forward lightly. He led them off the main road, about a mile or so from the fortress, veering off into the grasslands just before the hill jutted out of the valley. Steering around a pond, they pressed towards the bottom of the hill that Landmoor crowned.

It was certainly a privilege to be invited into the Rebellion's council. The other two commanders had special advisors who joined them when answering Ballinaire's summons. Folkes had decided it was time that he had an advisor as well, so he insisted that Dujahn be allowed to represent him. Ballinaire was distrustful, of course, but even he recognized the value of having one from the Gray Legion handy. He needed every ally he could muster.

"What did you learn about this meeting?" Folkes asked, his voice low and his eyes riveted on the torch fire high on the walls. "Do you know what Ballinaire wants?"

"He's managed to keep that secret," Dujahn muttered in response. "But I have managed to find out what he's done down here so far. As you saw coming down the road, the Shoreland Regiment is bunched up together in the Shadows Wood – less than a day's march away. Looks to me like Ballinaire is preparing to lay siege." He nodded to the keep as they started up the rugged slopes. "He has some troops in one part of the wood, but I couldn't get close enough to see what they were doing. I'm a spy, not a Sleepwalker – sounded like they were digging. Making trenches, maybe. I don't know."

"Trenches? Ballinaire won't sit still long enough for trenches. Not if don Rion sends more than a single duke's army."

"I agree with you. So, in addition to the regiment, we have the Kiran Thall roving the woods and blocking the road."

"Hmm," Folkes murmured. "Who else is here?"

"Dairron, of course. The General came in on his Dragonshrike before the sun had even set. I asked a contact in Dos-Aralon about him. He told me that Dairron flies over Avisahn regularly – trying to catch a peek at Silverborne's daughter, no doubt. Wants to abduct her, I've heard. Who knows for sure. Now, what about that advisor he's always with? I couldn't get much on her."

"Miestri," Folkes said with the look on his face as if he'd eaten a bad onion. "She's a Sorian, Hate thank him. How he got her to support him, I would pay in Aralonian pieces to find out." He gave Dujahn a sidelong look. "You still haven't been very useful there yet. Maybe I should hire someone else."

Dujahn chuckled. "Inlanders," he laughed, rolling his eyes. "King don Rion could pay me three times what you do. We could have your rebellion crushed before the first winter snow. But," he added comfortingly, "The Gray Legion wants Ballinaire to win. He's getting old, though. I've heard General Dairron will take over then. Is that true?"

Folkes shrugged. "That has not been decided yet. Maybe I will take over, Dujahn. It's true that Lord Ballinaire depends on Dairron the most. Without the soldiers he's recruited and his defensive tactics, the Bandit Rebellion would be half its size right now."

"Or dead," Dujahn pointed out. "Wasn't Dairron's father a regimental knight also? Like Ballinaire?"

"He was," Folkes replied, annoyed. "Served him during the Purge Wars, then rebelled with him too. Stanjel Dairron is a first generation Bandit, Dujahn. It's in his blood to hate don Rion. But that doesn't mean he could take over the Rebellion," he warned. "Not without a fight."

They approached the outer wall of Landmoor and stopped talking. It was too dangerous now.

Their horses grunted as they followed the base of the steep hill. Near a bend in the river, Dujahn stopped. There was a blackened inlet in the face of the hill, darker than the night. There was some old shrine buried under the hill that led to the catacombs beneath the city. Nudging his mount forward, he reached the edge of the entryway and swung his leg over the saddle. The smell of thistle and moss was thick in the air. In moments, several Bandit soldiers emerged from the shadows and took their steeds. There was a gap within the tiny entryway leading to a small ingress with a stone stairwell at the far end. Some old Shae markings were chiseled in the stone on the inside, but they had faded and crumbled to the point that Dujahn couldn't read them. His grasp of Silvan writing was still mediocre. The horses were left below as they started up the stairwell.

"The garrison commander would have a seizure if he knew about this," Folkes muttered. "Does the Governor know?"

"Haven't met the man," Dujahn replied with a shrug. "Would you like me to?"

Folkes gave Dujahn an angry look and ignored the question.

He doesn't know when I'm being serious, Dujahn thought blackly. What an oaf.

Within the shadowed alcove of the inner bailey, a detachment of Bandit officers met them. The officers had neatly trimmed beards and short hair, common for the humid Shoreland region. They wore the black plate mail and gold trim of Bandit Rebellion officers. Dujahn noticed how none of the common Bandit soldiers were armored the same way – only the officers. It was a remnant, he knew, of Ballinaire's own days leading don Rion's army. Long, long ago. Dujahn already kept a mental note of the twists and turns of the tunnel. He knew where to go. Torches glared from racks mounted on the walls, offering smoky light to the dark, broken corridors. After walking some distance, they arrived at a huge cellar that had been fortified with beams and stone – a fortress beneath a fortress. It was cool in the tunnels, and Dujahn sighed with relief. If Ballinaire didn't want him as an advisor, Dujahn hoped his next assignment took him to the milder northlands. Or maybe the Bronnfisher Islands. That would be interesting too. He remembered something about a plague jewel there…

The Bandit officers opened the door and allowed them both to enter. Dujahn inhaled the smell of burning cloves and peered around Folkes. He saw General Dairron leaning against the far wall, but the smoke came from an older man in dark robes. He stopped short, trying to remember who the old man was. That's right. The other Sorian.

Between the Ravenstone and the Kingshadow there lived two of the Sorian order. He knew that Miestri – Dairron's supporter – lived with some renegade Shae in a valley cut into the Kingshadow Mountains. He had never met her, but had heard she was very beautiful. Some said she looked like a Shae, except she had ebony hair and dark eyes. The other Sorian in the valley sat right in front of him, smoking a pipe. He had been told the man called himself Mage. He wore simple black robes with a patterned green hem. He was of medium height and, by the wrinkles around his eyes and cheekbones, between fifty and sixty. But it was whispered in the Gray Legion that he was older than the world – that all the Sorian were. The Gray Legion had sent plenty of spies to learn more about them, but none had ever returned…not even the Sleepwalkers. Dujahn didn't think he was in any danger as long as he stayed near Folkes.

The one called Mage sat in a high-backed oak chair, his green eyes studying the spy and the Bandit Commander.

Folkes took one of the high thick-stuffed chairs around the table. Dujahn stepped casually into a far corner and watched. He had a good view of the room. Folkes grabbed a goblet and filled it with ale. He took a deep swallow and set the cup down with a thump. Looking up, Folkes seemed

to notice Dairron for the first time, leaning against the far wall, his arms folded across his chest.

"When is Ballinaire going to get here?" Folkes muttered at last, wiping a trail of ale from the day's growth on his chin.

"When he pleases," Dairron replied. "You know that."

"Do you know why we're here?" Folkes demanded, and Dairron shrugged and stood still, looking unconcerned and composed.

"I thought it was obvious. He wants to start the war."

"And that doesn't worry you?" Folkes challenged. "I'm surprised you're not pacing and muttering about supply trains, sieges and sappers."

Dairron smiled. "I've rather been looking forward to it, Folkes. We've been baiting the bear too long. It's time to call down the wolves."

"Oh cut your tongue for once, Stanjel. You know what we're up against – what don Rion can put in the field. We're in Landmoor for Hate's sake! This is still one of don Rion's cities. If he knew we were here, he'd have the knights swoop down so fast our heads would be spinning on a pike."

Dujahn studied the Bandit General for a reaction. General Dairron shook his head, chuckling, and unfolded his huge arms. His hair was the color of dark soil with a few wisps of gray. He wore the armor of the Bandit Rebellion with pride, the mail shirt encased in black plate. Four gold general bars, pinned to his thin traveling cloak, glinted in the lamplight. Dujahn remembered hearing how Dairron had earned them. Even in the Gray Legion, he was a legend for what he had done. Nearly every kingdom outside the valley had offered him a military command. He continued to refuse them all. Dairron wanted Dos-Aralon. He wouldn't leave.

"If is the keystone," the General reminded Folkes, snapping Dujahn out of his reverie. "If he knew. I think the King of Dos-Aralon should spend less on his velvet court and polished knights, and more on intelligence." He gave Dujahn a sidelong look iced with enmity. "Besides, Phollen's Regiment is close enough. Quit fussing."

"Be assured, Commander Folkes," Mage said softly. "We would not be meeting in Landmoor if it were not secure." His voice was like worn leather gloves that fit perfectly. Dujahn saw his eyes pierce right through Folkes.

"Where are the others?" Folkes asked the Sorian, trying to ignore Dairron's mocking eyes.

"If I've heard correctly," Dairron interrupted with an etched smile, "the Commander of the Shoreland Regiment is heading to Sol." He chuckled again. "Probably chasing a serving girl."

"Your ears listen that far east, General Dairron?" Mage said in his whisper-like voice. "That surprises me." Dujahn caught the subtlety, but he saw that Folkes didn't. No, Folkes never paid attention to the details. Dujahn understood that Miestri claimed the western half of the valley as her land. And Mage claimed the east. Dujahn thought a moment, trying to put it together. Dairron was a general and commanded a brigade – the largest force the Bandits controlled and he occupied the heights of the Kingshadow with it. Then there was Mage and Tsyrke Phollen, the Shoreland commander, who had a regiment of soldiers and the Kiran Thall. Folkes had the third regiment, the smallest, stationed in the Shardmist. And all three of these men would start hacking each other to pieces if Ballinaire lost control of them. Dujahn had to cover a grin at their idiocy.

"You know plenty about chasing tykes, Dairron," Folkes blurted out. He planted his elbows on the table with a rattle. Dujahn closed his eyes, knowing what was about to come out of his mouth. Ban it¸ Dujahn swore to himself. I shouldn't have mentioned the Princess of Avisahn.

"At least Phollen can get the women he dotes after, Dairron," Folkes blundered on. "What about the bleeding Princess of Avisahn? You fly over Silverborne's castle on your pet Dragonshrike

just to peek at her. Have you even seen her yet, or only in your dreams? Silk socks ready for the dance? You dote after the Shae like…"

General Dairron took several slow steps forward, his blue eyes cold and menacing. His shadow fell on the table. "Rather than using your tongue to spite me," he whispered acidly, "You might learn better ways to use your brain instead. If you mock the Princess of Avisahn or the Shae again, I'll cut out your tongue."

"You may frighten my spy, but not me," Folkes warned. "Don't cross me Dairron. Or you'll be facing the end of my sword."

Dujahn saw granite resolve in General Dairron's blue eyes, and he silently fumed. He wouldn't get a higher position in the Rebellion if Folkes got himself killed so quickly. Folkes was a seasoned battle commander, but Dairron was stronger in every way that counted. That man, he thought, fears nothing. Not the Shae, not Dos-Aralon, not a Sorian. Dujahn knew it was the ruthlessness of Dairron that Folkes coveted – which he found lacking in himself. It was jealousy, and it was poison to Folkes.

"Face the end of your sword? Trust me, Commander, it would take a bigger sword than yours," Dairron answered. "You've had your warning. Another taunt, and you're a dead man."

The cellar door creaked open and a woman wearing velvety black robes entered. Her eyes were black and sparkling and a sly grin spread across her mouth. Dujahn stared – she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Not one in a thousand harlots in Zhoff could have matched her flawless face. And Dujahn had seen the harlots of Zhoff. The feeling in the room cooled with her presence. She smelled like cinnamon and bitter herbs. Midnight hair, inky and smooth, spilled down from the cowl as she pulled it down. She was a Sorian. Dujahn could feel it as she passed by him. Her voice was soft.

"I hope I have not missed any bloodshed." She smiled playfully, but her eyes betrayed her contempt for Folkes. Folkes stared at her, and Dujahn could see the passion rise up in his eyes. He was half-drunk anyway, but not even he would dare to touch a Sorian. Not if he wanted to live.

"Choose your enemies wisely, Folkes," Dairron warned, backing away. "We are equals only so long as Lord Ballinaire stands over us. When he falls, you will answer to me. I do hope you remember that." Turning to Miestri, he added respectfully, "Welcome, Lady of Vale."

The Sorian gave Dairron a sultry smile. Her face was beautifully cold and compelling. Dujahn thought it strange – ageless but young. She wasn't the blossom of youth – not really. But was she just as ancient as Mage? Were all the Sorian alike in power, or were some greater than others? These were questions the Gray Legion would pay handsomely to have answered. It was one of the main reasons he was there on assignment. The Sorian were not found in every kingdom, yet this land had two. So strange…Dujahn wondered where her Shae escorts were. She supposedly never went anywhere without them. Or was that another false rumor?

"Welcome to Landmoor, Lord General," she answered Dairron with a smile. Her eyes passed quickly over those in the room. "Lord Ballinaire will see us now. And I think he's angry enough to kill one of you."

Dujahn swallowed.

# VII

The well-oiled shudder of armor sounded in the stillness of the underground tunnels along with the thud of marching boots. There were easily twenty men coming, Dujahn reasoned, cocking his head and listening. He had started to sweat again. The cellar door opened and the leader of the Bandit Rebellion entered – Lord Stroth Ballinaire. His white-plumed helmet was cradled in the crook of his arm, showing his long snowy hair down to his shoulders in the Inland fashion. His face was hard aged skin, split by wrinkled crags. He was easily seventy years old, but he wore his Bandit armor well. Five gold general bars and a golden star were pinned to his cape along the shoulder. The star, Dujahn remembered, signified the rank of Champion of Owen Draw. A title no knight had held since Ballinaire rebelled against King don Rion. Bloodshot blue eyes stared at them from beneath bushy black eyebrows flecked with gray. A thin white beard garnished his lower jaw. His voice was strong.

"Why are we missing one of my commanders?" Ballinaire said. His voice was strong and angry. Twenty warriors fanned out around him, filling the cellar. They were his personal guard, and he had seen to their training. The sculpted black ivy and leaves of their armor matched his. Had General Dairron ever been one of them? Dujahn didn't know that. There was still so much to learn. He kept perfectly still, inconspicuous.

"Commander Phollen is near Sol, my Lord," Mage answered, bowing his head slightly. "I will speak on his behalf."

"Were my instructions not clear?" Ballinaire snapped. "I wanted all my commanders here tonight. Has he rebelled against me? Why isn't he here?"

"Certainly not, Lord Ballinaire," Mage answered with patience and calm. "He sends his regrets, but it was not possible to make it here in time. He has to provision the regiment overseas, and he struck a deal on some stout Sheven-Ingen blades. But you may expect his arrival within the week." The green eyes narrowed triumphantly. "The summons is finished, his regiment has gathered. He will come to take Landmoor as you ordered. When all is ready."

Dujahn inhaled slowly, grateful that Folkes had hurried to the meeting. He would not have wanted to answer to Ballinaire for any reason. My apologies, Lord Ballinaire, but Commander Folkes was just too drunk to obey the summons. I'm assuming he'll arrive after he's cleared all that Spider Ale out of his bowels.

The leader of the Bandit Rebellion relented and nodded his head curtly. "I trust for good reason, Sorian. I trust he made every attempt to be here. In addition to the Shoreland Legion, you speak for the Drugaen Nation as well?"

Mage nodded. "Naturally."

The Drugaen were somewhat of a mystery to Dujahn. He knew little of their race other than that they were sturdy, blocky fellows who had been enslaved by the Sorian to work the mines of the Ravenstone. He knew there were two factions within the Drugaen Nation – the Faradin and the Krag. The Faradin had revolted and proclaimed their freedom and still fought to uphold it. The Krag were still loyal to some Sorian who had enslaved them a thousand years ago. The Krag were superstitious and followed anyone who could muster some spark of magic. And it didn't surprise him that another Sorian, like Mage, had met their need.

Ballinaire bowed his head. His gnarled, gloved hand trembled with age as it stroked his short white beard. Dujahn did not take it as a sign of weakness. No, Ballinaire was still strong enough to

keep General Dairron from usurping his place, two Bandit Commanders from killing each other, and a pair of Sorian at his disposal. Dujahn wanted to chuckle. The King of Dos-Aralon didn't know what he was up against.

"The time for war has arrived," Ballinaire said suddenly. His eyes went across every face in the room. "No more waiting or plotting. No more attempts at insurrection. We have come far and fought boldly. The swords of both armies have been sheathed in blood again and again. But this time, it will be different. By year's end, we will sup in don Rion's palace. The valley will be ours at last." Dairron glanced at Miestri, surprised. Folkes took a long swallow from his goblet and wiped his mouth. "Our efforts have stirred rebellion, to take what was wrongfully denied me after the Purge Wars. That insufferable king owes me a debt in blood, and I will take payment in blood. I promise you," he added with an excited edge in his voice, "That our ranks will swell as the flood engulfs the valley and those who support Dos-Aralon. King Birtoss don Rion will lose his crown, and those who defy us will be no more. No more knights of Owen Draw. No more dukes of Amberdian and Cypher. Even Iniva and the Yukilep will come in line or crumble." His eyes glittered with hatred. It was an emotion so intense in feeling and conviction that Dujahn felt it coiled deep within the old general's bones. "When I march to war this time, they will all fall. Every one."

"When?" General Dairron interrupted, his eyes gleaming and wary.

"Tonight," Ballinaire answered. "It begins this instant."

General Dairron stepped forward, his eyes exultant. "You've considered my plan then? Shall we seek a union with Avisahn, combine with them to destroy Dos-Aralon?"

"The Shae?" Ballinaire coughed, amused. "What have the Shae ever done for us? When have they ever sought an alliance with me? I tell you, General, the Bandit Rebellion will spread like fire through dried weeds this time, until this entire valley is ablaze. I will not bargain – I will not cajole with those fools across the river. I will march on this valley until the governors and princes and kings cry to me for peace, until they submit to the rule they denied me so long ago." Lord Ballinaire shook his head slowly. "My plans have nothing to do with the Shae. We will conquer don Rion, the Yukilep, and even the Shae. We will do it alone."

Dairron shook his head. "My Lord, we number no more than a tenth of what don Rion can put in the field. The lowlands are vast, we cannot attack with total surprise. And yet you suggest we can siege and break the city of Dos-Aralon before the winter snows? With all the other Dukes collapsing on our flanks like lions? And we can do this…by ourselves?"

"Listen to him," Miestri said assuringly. Her black eyes glittered with mirth. She spoke to Dairron but her eyes were on Mage. The two Sorian glared at each other, almost defiantly. Folkes watched Ballinaire and Dairron. He missed out on the interplay.

"You are wrong, General," Ballinaire replied. "We already know that don Rion can put more in the field than we can." He shook his head, his fist tightening. "But now numbers are of no consequence. A smaller force can withstand a mightier one through many advantages."

Dairron's eyebrows raised. "What? You will taunt him into attacking the mountains? You know he won't. Or do you think this fortress is enough to stand against him?" His laugh was cold. "I could take this castle in a fortnight. It certainly won't stop don Rion. Prince of Fire," Dairron swore, "I enjoy your rhetoric, Lord Ballinaire, but you must convert my sword too. Our men won't fight fed on stuffed morale or promises. We cannot match don Rion's ability to wage war without an alliance. And the Shae are the only way. Their chief city is across the river from our enemies, vulnerable..."

"You are the one mistaken, General. I say that our forces not only can match don Rion's, but

can defeat them with minimal casualties. Listen to me, my friend, my cautious commander. Not even the Shae will be able to stand against us with their timid sparks of Silvan magic. I tell you that don Rion's head will hang rotting on a spike in the entrance gate of Dos-Aralon!" Ballinaire reached into the pouch he wore at his belt and produced a handful of green moss with flecks of blue and violet. It dripped moisture on the floor. Dujahn stared at it. He remembered the digging crews in the forest. He hadn't been able to get close enough to see what they were digging up.

"What is that?" Folkes said, his face pinching with curiosity. "It looks like...moss."

"Where did you find that?" Mage demanded, leaning forward. To Dujahn, it looked like the Sorian was about to come out of his robes. "It doesn't exist any more. It was all destroyed..."

"No, wise one," Miestri countered with a trace of mock in her voice. "There is more of it…here."

* * *

The sun sneaked through the gray folds of the cloudy sky, swelling the haze with golden hues. The morning fog lingered over the damp marsh grass, swirling thick enough in some pockets to gutter out a weak candle. The field beyond the northern walls of Landmoor was quiet, save for the lilting warble of swallows and the occasional shriek of a jackdaw. Dujahn crept up and nestled behind a droopy bush. He waited.

The Sorian Miestri stepped through the shrouded pasture, her black robes hissing against the thick stalks of marsh grass. Two figures flanked her, gripping ash longbows fitted with bodkin arrows. Each wore drab green cloaks that hid their faces and concealed the glint of fine mail. She walked straight through the field, not deviating at all as the fog roamed about her. A shadow loomed ahead, but she walked steadily toward it until the form coalesced. It was huge, hulking. Dujahn kept his distance, but stayed close enough to see them both. He could not stop looking at Miestri. He hadn't been able to since the night before. This was his chance…what he had been preparing for. To get into a circle of Sorian and learn about them. The knowledge would be worth enough to buy a village…maybe even a castle.

The general's Dragonshrike hunched forward, its glossy black scales shifting as its serpentine-scaled wings shrugged and its eagle-like head swung around toward her. It's thick beak opened, hissing. Glassy black eyes blinked once. The leather shoulder harness creaked and General Dairron eased from the stirrup straps and landed on the grass with a soft sound. His glinting plate mail was gone, replaced by a black riding uniform made from thick sections of leather stitched tightly together at the elbows, shoulders, and knees. He tugged his gloves on securely. Dujahn squinted and cocked his head. He advanced to a closer shrub, careful of every step. Not too close…just enough to listen in…carefully…

"That was a brilliant performance last night, General," Miestri said, stepping up to the tall Bandit. "You actually seemed surprised and angry. Did you see the look on Mage's face?"

"I think he nearly choked," Dairron replied smoothly. "You've done well down here, Miestri. Does the old fool have any other orders for me this morning?"

"Which old fool?" she replied with a silvery laugh. "Yours? Lord Ballinaire is growing impatient for you to leave. He had hoped you would be gone before dawn."

Dairron shrugged. "Patience has never been his foremost quality." He sighed. "I'm furious he ordered you to stay in Landmoor. I need you in the Kingshadow, not frittering your talents down here."

Miestri's voice was light, almost musical. "It is a pity – but necessary. It is still too early to let the top spin out by itself without any coaxing. And I discovered the hall below the tunnels where the Silvan Records were kept. They date back half a millenium, so we may find what you've been searching for. The information about the Crystal will certainly be very useful now."

"But it is information that Lord Ballinaire could also use," he warned. "The fool is going to get himself killed this time. No more border raids, no more splintered agreements. He's digging a hole deep enough to bury us all." He shook his head angrily. "We've come too far for him to ruin everything."

"He just may live, Stanjel. What if he discovers the secret of the Everoot?"

"Isn't that why you are staying then?" Dairron reminded her. "Make sure that he doesn't. And make sure the other Sorian doesn't convince him to abandon the idea. Not only did Mage look shocked, but greensick as well. He knows everything about that plant. Who is to say he doesn't know about the Crystal as well?"

"Don't fear the old man," Miestri replied. "He is waning. And when he falls, I will take his dominion. He never knew about the Crystal. He never knew what the Shae did to protect it. That is our advantage. Just be sure your army never leaves the mountains, General. I will meet you in Vale when it is time to take command of the Bandit Rebellion."

Dairron shook his head and chuckled. "You saw Ballinaire last night – he doesn't consider the Shae a threat! When they find out, every Crimson Wolfsman in the whole banned eastern forest will be down here with the Silvan high army behind. If my plan is going to work, I don't want them finding out too soon. Nor do I want any needlessly killed. Laisha Silverborne won't support me if she thinks the Bandit Rebellion are nothing but Shae-killers." He paused. "Unless we can get her to believe that Dos-Aralon is."

"I've already begun the arrangements," Miestri said. She cocked her head. "Your care for Silverborne's daughter is quite beyond me. You know it is Forbidden to the Shae to cavort with you." Her voice was low, seductive. "Is Laisha truly worth all that trouble?"

"She is worth any trouble," Dairron answered strongly. "Prince of Fire, not only is she fair, but cunning, too! She rules that kingdom, not her father. We have always fought against the Shae, Miestri. If we manage it right, they will fight for us." He nodded to her escort. "And not just the Shae from the Wilderness of Vale, but all of Avisahn."

Dujahn stopped breathing. This was worth even more than he thought. Folkes was an idiot – he would never rule the Rebellion. It would be Dairron and Miestri – he knew it instinctively. This was the kind of plotting that the East Kingdoms did, not some out-of-the-way protected vassalage. The scheming was cold and utterly ruthless. Dujahn loved it.

Miestri bowed her head. "As I have said, I am already engaged in that effort."

"Good." He rubbed his lip. "The meeting with Lord Ballinaire changed our previous plan, but it can also help us." He folded his gloved hands together over his mouth. "Ballinaire is leaning over the edge of the pit he's dug. I want to do what I can to push him in."

"Indeed," Miestri agreed. "What else would you have me do, General?"

Dairron pointed north, away from the city. "One small favor. The Shoreland regiment is camped in the Shadows Wood. While Mage hurries to Sol, do what you can to stir dissension in the regiment. See how many officers and Kiran Thall will follow you. Cause some havoc," he added with a grin. "You're so good at that."

She laughed. "That would prove entertaining. Ballinaire is preoccupied with hoarding his find in the swamp. He won't know what I'm doing."

The Bandit General smiled. "Then I will prepare in the Kingshadow. You are my eyes and ears in Landmoor. I especially want to know how he reacts to what we do."

"What about Folkes?" she asked with a little yawn. "He knows something is happening."

"Leave Folkes to me," Dairron said grimly. "Either he joins us or the Duke of Owen and the Governor of Iniva hangs him on a rope. I'll give him a chance to decide."

"Be sure you teach him the consequences." She smiled, and touched Dairron's arm affectionately. "Safe journey, General," she said with a nod and stepped back a few paces. "These beasts hate the moors. You had better go. But if you fly near Avisahn again, be sure to stay out of bow range. They may be waiting for you with their own alarion this time."

The Dragonshrike twisted its shoulder to the grass and Dairron gripped the leather harness and pulled himself onto the saddle as it straightened itself. Cinching the leather straps around his legs, he looked down at the black-robed woman with midnight dark hair and gave her an etched smile.

"If there are, I will deal with them. Remember why we are here," he said from above, offering her a simple nod.

Miestri smiled and flashed him a sultry grin. "Oh, my memory is very good, General. I will join you in the Kingshadow as soon as I am able. It has been very dull in the Vale recently. Wars can be amusing."

Dairron nodded and slid his arms into the harness fittings. He touched a glass orb at the saddle's pommel and the Dragonshrike rose on its legs, its huge razor-like wings unfolding as it flexed its shoulder muscles. The plumage was dark on the back, like a crow's.

Dujahn squinted, staring up at the looming silhouette. He was perfectly still.

"Do you think the spy has heard enough?" Dairron stated. "The one over by that bush."

"I've let him listen in on us," the Sorian replied. "Venay shaye nu!" Miestri ordered crisply in Silvan. Her two escorts whirled around, their longbows pulled tightly and arrows aiming straight for Dujahn.

He cringed in the mud, not daring to move. From the mist came a whisper of cloth and Miestri appeared in her flowing black robes. He stared at her midnight eyes. She was going to kill him. She was going to rip out his entrails.

"An early morning stroll for the Gray Legion spy…Dujahn, isn't it?" Dairron asked, folding his arms casually and leaning forward in the saddle harness. "Or can you think up another inane excuse that's more convincing?"

"I came…I came to seek you out, General," Dujahn spluttered. "The Gray Legion can help you. We want you to rule Dos-Aralon. The other nations fear it more than anything."

Miestri reached into her robes and withdrew a sphere of red glass. Something twitched inside of it, an orange smoky light that hungered to reach out and snap at him. Dujahn watched it, mesmerized – terrified.

"I came to help you!" he insisted. "By Achrolese, I swear it! I have information about Folkes. About don Rion and the Shae!"

"I know," Miestri replied. "And you will."

# VIII

Dawn broke into the little camp by the river over a haze of fog. Thealos had noticed it getting thicker each morning the further south they went. The day began as it typically did, with Tomn trying to coax the ashes back to life with fresh wood and a snapping flint-stone. Tannon was always one of the first up, sharpening the brace of knives he wore with a slow methodical ring from a whetstone. Not that the knives needed it, but the sound was nearly impossible to sleep through. Beck and Hoth came awake more slowly, each stumbling a few paces into the surrounding glen to relieve themselves against a tree. Thealos writhed in disgust.

"You look tired," Tannon mumbled to the cook between the ringing strokes on the whetstone.

"Didn't sleep well," Tomn replied with a shrug, casting a surreptitious glance at Thealos.

Sitting in the grass, Thealos rubbed his ankles. "How far are we from the woods where you found the Wolfsman?" he asked Tannon.

"Another day's walk at least," the leader replied. "About half-way to the Shoreland."

Thealos had already guessed that. He knew the Trident River followed the western borders of the Shae kingdom until it split into three tributaries and dumped into the sea. There was a human city down at the base of the nearest one, a trading port called Sol. To the east, further away, was Jan-Lee, a Shae watchpost.

"I've been thinking, Tannon," Thealos continued with a purposeful voice. "If the Sinew dragon did kill the Wolfsman, it might still be guarding its clutch. You never found the dragon's body, so it could be waiting for us. Have you thought about that?"

Tannon nodded and sheathed another dagger into his belt. "We can handle a Sinew dragon, boy. It's the clutch we were looking for and couldn't find."

"I don't doubt it. But at what cost?"

"You scared of it?"

"A wise man would be," Thealos replied with an even tone. "Is anyone in your band an archer?" The way he had seen pock-faced Jurrow handle the short bow he had stolen, he didn't think so.

"A Flaming Arrow?" Tannon groaned. He chuckled. "We don't need any of those."

Flaming Arrow? Thealos had no idea what that meant, but he shrugged. "Just a suggestion. I'm a pretty good aim, despite what you may think. Maybe I'd be useful in a fight, that's all." He let it go, let the idea seed and sprout in Tannon's mind. He continued to massage his ankles.

Tannon gave him a wary look and then glanced over at the bow next to Jurrow. "Let him loose," Tannon ordered. "His bowels are probably near ready to burst."

The rest of the morning went by quickly. Gulping down some heavy porridge spiced with sugar and cloves, Thealos observed Tannon's Band break camp. It disgusted him in every aspect. To the Shae, fire was more than burning sticks. It was a power only carefully handled. It seemed to Thealos that half the Rules of Forbiddance related to it in some way. Putting out a campfire or a hearthfire was done methodically, to make sure every ember died out. Ashes were buried, covered with stones. It was even Forbidden to char meat, so the Shae dinner platters were served a little rare. But Tannon's Band burned even their stews, they kicked out a fire and left it smoldering, abandoning their responsibility for taming it. Thealos frowned, their arrogance for the land galled him.

They continued the long march alongside the river. Thealos watched the interplay between the members of the band. At first, they had all looked alike to him, but now he saw the subtle

shades between them. Beck and Hoth were inseparable, keeping to themselves and joking about women and gambling. Both were considered handsome for humans and their thoughts were never far from the taverns they had left behind. Cropper was a skulk and always took the rear, his eyes never leaving Thealos' back. Jurrow was pock-marked so badly that he had grown a reddish beard that covered most of his face. Tomn had Shae-green eyes and appeared to be the closest to Tannon emotionally. Twice during the trip, Thealos overheard Tomn say they should give Thealos' things back to him. Tannon rebuffed him.

After stopping to rest at midday, Tannon loosed Thealos' wrists and had Jurrow give him the short bow and a brace of steel-tipped bodkins. Thealos fondled the wood and then re-strung it, feeling more confident with it in his hand. They gave him the bow just in case the Sinew dragon left its clutch and came after them. The bow came with a warning.

"You use one of those against us again, boy," Tannon said, "And not even the Crimson Wolfsmen will be able to tell you were a Shaden."

Thealos nodded that he understood. It took every bartering instinct inside him to keep his face straight, to hide the fear writhing in his stomach. But he had his bow back.

* * *

Before dusk, they reached the borders of a decaying forest of maple trees, nearly five miles wide. There was no road or trail through it, and the river cut directly into it, creating gulches and a network of gullies around the waterfront. As they set up camp again for the night, Thealos cautiously approached the wood and stared at the dark strips of bark splintering from the trunks. The trees were growing too close together, their branches interlocked, causing a web of leaves to blot out the sun. Huge bullfrogs croaked by the river, and the wind hissed as it shook the limbs. A fetid smell greeted him, something sick. Thealos walked around the edge of the forest and examined the trees. He touched the bark and sifted through dead leaves with his fingers. Craning his neck, he looked up to the top and listened for the familiar bugs and beetles. There were only a few but that gave him a little hope. No birds nested in the limbs, no animals scuttled away. It was practically empty of wood life – at least for now. Kneeling in the grass, he pulled up a clump of grass by the roots. He smelled the mud and then frowned and blinked his eyes shut. He nearly retched.

"What is it?" Tomn asked, crouching by him.

"Forbidden Magic," Thealos said in a low voice. The others from Tannon's Band crowded around. "This forest didn't grow like this, it was twisted this way."

"It smells like trope," Hoth muttered, stamping the swampy grass to dislodge cakes of mud from his boot.

"But you smell magic?" Jurrow questioned skeptically.

Thealos nodded. "Not just smell it, Jurrow -- I can feel it. My people are very sensitive to Earth Magic, and we can tell when its been poisoned. It has its own smell." He replanted the clump of grass and stood, brushing his hands. "I don't know whether the Sinew dragon is in there or not." Hoth laughed, but Thealos ignored him. "It takes a long time for the Earth Magic to restore ground after it has been infected," Thealos explained. "If my people lived on this side of the river, we would help clean it up and it would recover sooner."

Beck and Hoth rolled their eyes. Tomn nodded with interest.

"We're running out of daylight," Tannon said. "And I don't want to go after it in the dark. Jurrow, fetch some wood for the fire. Hoth and Beck – see if you can find a rabbit or something. I'm

tired of eating wild onions. If we find that clutch, I promised you thirty days leave in Dos-Aralon."

Hoth and Beck grinned at each other and started out in search of food. Cropper glowered at Thealos with dark eyes, but he met his stare with one of his own. While Tomn brought out the dirty cauldron, Tannon sat down against a jagged tree stump and started oiling his knives with a dirty rag. As Thealos stood there, he felt them all around, like ashy smoke that stuck to his clothes. There was a mocking look in their eyes as they glanced at him, except for Tomn. It was some grand joke that he was a part of but didn't understand. Thealos knew they did not understand the Shae. They didn't even care to understand.

But the joke would be against them. Somewhere, in the thick tangled maple, he had felt something else. Something he had learned from the Wolfsman's shawl and hadn't shared with them. There was another magic in the wood, and he could sense it – like a pure chord of music none of them could hear. It whispered through the branches and hummed against his skin.

Silvan Magic.

* * *

Tannon smirked, the firelight painting his face in reds and oranges. "So did we all, boy. And granted, we did a banned decent job of it. But the truth is, you just can't make someone obey who's determined not to. Sure, King don Rion rules this valley in name, but the regional governors and the dukes actually rule. He has a strutting court in the city, full of his dukes and knights and princes. But down here, down near the Shoreland, it's ruled by whoever has enough strength. There's a saying that goes with it…"

"What a man can take with his sword is his own," Thealos answered. "I've heard about it. We don't believe in it, though."

"Sure, Shaden," Cropper said. "You believe what a man can steal with his mouth is his own. You could barter a man's arm off his shoulder and he'd think he was getting a bargain. Banned liars, all of you," he grumbled.

Tannon scowled at Cropper for interrupting.

"How did the Bandit Rebellion begin?" Thealos probed, dipping the rabbit meat into the stew. Tomn had been careful and given him a cut before he charred the rest.

"You've got to look at it two ways, with two different leaders, Shaden. Back during the Purge Wars," Tannon explained, "The Rebellion was by the League of Ilvaren – led by that pirate, Kiran Phollen. It was Shorelanders versus Inlanders back then. Phollen refused to obey the king's summons and to pay the king's taxes. It started a war that lasted for years. Sure, they killed him and all, but his sons lived. One became the new pirate leader, and the other formed a cavalry group of Bandit horsemen called the Kiran Thall."

Beck and Hoth whistled. "I hate the Kiran Thall," Beck said with a shudder.

"I see," Thealos said with a nod. "Then what about Ballinaire? How does he fit in to this?"

Jurrow grinned, his red beard widening. "Inlanders versus Inlanders now. He joined the Rebellion, Shaden. And now he leads it."

"But why? What made him turn from don Rion?"

Tannon took a long drink from his flask of ale and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "Who cares," he replied, stifling a burp. "Why does anyone?"

Thealos was appalled. "You're part of Dos-Aralon's army and you don't even know why you're fighting?"

Tannon glared at him. "Why should I care about anything except getting paid? Does it even matter whose grudge is more important? It's nobles squabbling. They've always done that. Except this time Ballinaire turned the Rebellion into a banned regimental army, and he does a banned good job keeping don Rion from sleeping nights. The dukes try and box him in, but Ballinaire wiggles out and stabs at the flanks. We're always sent here and there, chase him to that ravine, follow him in that hole." He scowled. "All we get is ten pieces a month. It isn't worth enough to care about any of it."

Thealos looked at Tannon curiously. "Have you thought about joining the Rebellion then?"

"They get paid even less. Remember those Kiran Thall that tried to woo us, Cropper? Showed them where they could put their seven pieces. But you know, Shaden, in our own way, we are a little rebellion," Tannon answered smugly. "Here, you look thirsty, boy. Have a drink." He offered the flask.

Thealos shook his head. "It's Forbidden."

"If you're going to sleep with us, you might as well drink with us," Tannon pressed. He offered the flask again.

"It's against my customs," Thealos replied. "I would have shared the Silvan wine with you, but it's already gone."

"What's the banned difference?" Hoth snorted, gulping down his own. "Both make you drunk."

"One is Forbidden," Thealos replied. "The other isn't."

"Leave him alone," Tomn said from the fire, scraping the sides of the scorched cauldron to fill another bowl.

"What's the matter with you, Tomn?" Beck jeered. "You wish you were a Shaden too?" He gave Thealos a cutting look. "Here's a question for you, boy. You've asked us about the valley, but I want to know about your people." His voice was slightly slurred, and his breath stank of ale.

"I'm sure you do," Thealos said under his breath.

"Tell me about your land. Is it true that you pray to the trees? Oh, and what about that lovely lass Laisha Silverborne! Does she really dress in silk socks and dance around the Palace grounds? I've heard that. Haven't you? She's so high and snooty, some royal wench. Or do you dance just praying for a peek at her or does she come out wearing..."

"You mock what you don't understand," Thealos said tightly.

"Then I'm right, am I?" Beck hooted.

"No – you're just displaying your ignorance. Is it true that humans grunt like rabbits when they breed?"

"What did you…?" Beck challenged, rising quickly.

"Sit down, Beck," Tannon stamped.

"But you heard what he…"

A dagger flashed in Tannon's hand and the soldier stared back at it warily. "We need him alive. He's been a good help to us."

"He hasn't done a banned thing," Cropper fumed.

"I think I want to change my vote now," Hoth said, giving Thealos a cruel look. "We don't need a Shaden in our band. Kill him and dump him in the river."

Thealos felt a surge of real fear, but his anger proved stronger. He wanted to throttle Hoth with both hands. Containing his rage and clenching his teeth, he sat silently, glaring at Tannon's Band. Tomn released the wooden spoon, his hand dropping on the hilt of a dagger.

"There's more of us who want him dead now," Cropper told Tannon.

"In the morning," Tannon replied. "No one touches him tonight. Got that, Cropper?"

"He's just a Shaden. He's got you blind now too."

"If you want your thirty days of leave," Tannon replied, "you'd better start doing your job. Now stand watch."

"Tie him up, first."

"He ain't going anywhere…"

Cropper shook his head. "Tie him up, or I'll kill him now." He took a step forward, jerking the mace loose in his belt hoop.

"It's all right," Thealos said, offering his wrists to be tied, trying to stifle the mounting tension. "I know the rules. And Beck," he gave the other soldier a half-mocking smile, "we dance in white silk socks. They have to be a certain color." It earned him a few chuckles from Hoth and Beck, helping to mollify the mood a little. "Come on," he said lightly. "We were only joking." Tannon and Cropper glared at each other. Finally, Cropper cursed and stalked off into the shadows.

Thealos decided that he'd better not be with Tannon's Band in the morning.

* * *

"I'm sorry if they scared you tonight," Tomn said in hushed tones, scrubbing the pot again. Thealos didn't know why the cook bothered. Without scalding water, soap, and a chisel, he would never get it clean. Tomn sat next to Thealos where they could keep their voices pitched low so the others wouldn't hear. Tannon snored like a bladder horn. Jurrow twitched in his sleep, his arm cradling a wineskin. Beck and Hoth were also asleep. That left Cropper in the perimeter. From the corner of his eye, Thealos could see him in the darkness outside the rings of firelight.

Thealos studied Tomn. Finishing the pot, the cook plopped down and dusted his pants. His reddish-brown hair looked gold with the fire behind him. He had a splotch of freckles across his nose and cheeks.

"I am scared," Thealos whispered. "They almost killed me tonight."

Tomn looked over at him, concern wrinkling his brow. "I wouldn't have let them."

Thealos smiled sadly. "Four against two isn't very good odds. That's about how many humans there are compared with the Shae. You could say we're used to being outnumbered, but not against soldiers. I'm not a soldier, Tomn."

Tomn tugged at the rim of his boot. "What does your name mean, Thealos? In your language."

"Thealos means 'Spirited.' I wasn't the easiest child my correl and sorrel had to raise."

"Hmm," Tomn muttered, wringing his hands. "You said your father…I mean, your correl, was a cloth barter, right? If I showed you something, you would be able to tell me what it's worth, right?"

Thealos nodded. While Tomn went over to his own knapsack, Thealos glanced back at Cropper. His head had started to sag down on his chest. Good. The cook returned with a large bundle wrapped in oilskin to protect it. He untied the leather thongs and gently unraveled the fabric. It was a fine wool gown, cut to fit a human woman, made from a rich shade of ochre with a blue and violet trim around the bodice. It certainly wasn't Silvan in style or pattern, but it was attractive.

"It's a nice gown, Tomn," Thealos said approvingly. "I'd examine it, but I can't like this…" He held up his wrists and shrugged. Let him untie me, Vannier. Let him untie me.

The cook made sure everyone was asleep and then helped untie the knots that bound Thealos. Thealos rubbed the circulation back into his hands. He took the fabric and quickly examined the seams. "They used the Silvan stitch-marking rules, good. Wool is a fine sturdy fabric, very popular in the city. The trim is also nice – I like the pattern here. Where did you get this?"

"I bought it in Sol."

Thealos nodded. "You probably paid over twenty pieces for it."

"Twenty-five."

"A good price. You could sell it in Dos-Aralon for thirty and make a profit."

Tomn shook his head. "No, it's for a serving girl I know. She'd look so pretty in it. She has dark hair and dark eyes. She said… she says she likes that I'm so quiet. Do you think she'll like it?"

"I think so," Thealos replied warmly. "If you treat her as well as you do others. Sounds like she's a rare woman. 'Rare as a brown-eyed Shae.' That's what my people would say."

"That's right, I'm sorry I've been calling you a Shaden. You have green eyes, like mine. I didn't know Shae had brown eyes – I thought they were all blue or green or something."

"I've never met a brown-eyed Shae before either," Thealos replied. "It doesn't happen among my people. I have seen a few who are dark-haired, but that's also pretty rare. You're right. We have blue, green, or gray eyes, and sometimes a mix of the three. But I've never even heard of a brown-eyed Shae. That's why it's an expression."

"Ohh," Tomn said. He fidgeted for a moment and then pulled another bundle out of his shirt. "I wanted to give this back to you. I don't know what it is or what it means, but it wasn't right for us to take your things like we did. We'd get in trouble with the army if they found out. Here. I'm sorry." He handed Thealos the small leather bundle that held Arielle's hoppit doll. A pang of homesickness struck his heart like a dagger. Thealos smiled, a sad smile. He'd never missed his family so much in his life.

"Thank you, Tomn. It belonged to my sister. It's just a toy."

"Well, it's yours. You'd better get some sleep. It's my turn for watch anyway – you don't have to stay up with me. We'll be pretty busy in the morning, looking for the clutch. I think we'll find it this time."

It was time. "I don't think they'll let me help you find it," Thealos stated in a quiet voice.

"What do you mean?"

"You heard Cropper and Hoth tonight, Tomn." He dropped his voice even lower. "I think they're going to kill me tomorrow."

"I won't let them," Tomn muttered, his face pained.

"But what can you do? Even if I led them right to it, do you think they'd let me go? I could report you to the army commanders in Dos-Aralon. They know that."

"I think they'd let you go if you promised..." the cook insisted.

Thealos shook his head. "No, Tomn. I don't think they will. I'm just a Shaden to them. If I help, then there's no reason to keep me alive. Don't you see? I lose either way."

"I could cut you loose," the cook suggested. "Cropper just hates Shade…the Shae because a barter tricked him and his brother with a contract and they had to spend some time in jail. But I don't think you're all like that. You're the first one I've ever really known."

"Then would you help me, Tomn?" Thealos pressed. "If I helped you?"

"How? Cut your ankles loose now?"

Thealos shook his head. "What if I took you to the clutch now? Tonight. After we've found it, you can let me go. I trust you, Tomn. I don't trust them. You'd get first pick of the clutch too. Do

they ever let you get the first choice?"

Tomn's eyes lit with eagerness. "You think you can find it, Thealos? In the dark?"

"It would be easier for me in the dark," Thealos promised, knowing that his eyes were glowing white-gold with firelight.

# IX

Thealos had lost count how many days he had spent with Tannon's Band. The night in Nordain's council chamber was a blur in his memory, a fragment of time rubbed away by the bonds he had worn with the Aralonian soldiers. The back of his head still had a tender spot from the first of Cropper's blows, but a knot had formed there. It would take at least another week to heal fully. Thealos glanced over his shoulder, watching as Tomn struggled through the screening trees in the dark. Pausing, Thealos grabbed the cook's arm and helped him duck beneath a clawing branch that would have scraped across his face.

"Ban, it's so dark," Tomn whispered, his voice edged with panic. He'd never been out in the woods at night before, not without a lantern or a torch.

"We'll be all right," Thealos assured him, maneuvering around a slanted boulder. Tomn stumbled, but Thealos caught him and helped him gain his feet. The maple trees were huge and twisted, their branches interlocking and blotting out the sky and stars. The blue glow of Eroth peeked through the gaps of leaves and branches providing just enough light for Thealos.

"Do you…do you think the Sinew dragon is dead?" Tomn asked worriedly.

"Yes," Thealos replied with confidence in his voice. "Stop here a moment. I need to get another bearing." He lowered his cowl and heard the wind rustling the leaves, Tomn's ragged breathing, the shrill call of an owl. No sounds of pursuit. Thealos was grateful for every moment, though he was not truly concerned about their ability to find him in the dark. He just didn't want to hurry.

Kneeling in the damp earth, Thealos closed his eyes and plunged his hands into the gritty mud. Tomn huffed from the journey. Thealos listened patiently, feeling through the inky swirls of Forbidden Magic staining the mud, a magic that had scarred the land and destroyed the trees and life within the small forest. If the Sinew dragon was dead, the land would finally begin drinking from the Earth Magic again. Then it would regain its health. His fingers went quickly numb from the cold mud, but he probed deeper, trying to feel the right pulse. He wasn't searching for Earth Magic or Forbidden Magic. He looked for something else. He heard it then, faintly, beckoning him nearer to the river. Silvan Magic – the kind that the Crimson Wolfsmen had. It was a chord of purity in the darkness. He smiled and opened his eyes.

"Did you find it? Is it…singing to you, Thealos?"

Thealos wiped his hands on his pants and nodded. "We're close, Tomn."

As they started into the trees once more, he caught movement out of the corner of his eye. It was barely a shadow, something blacker than the woods. Whirling, he slipped out his small hunting bow, an arrow at the ready. A feeling prickled on the back of his neck, going straight down his spine. He didn't see anything. But he knew something was there – watching him.

"What is it?" Tomn gasped, drawing a dagger from his belt.

"I saw something," Thealos said, certain of it. He studied the darkness, scanning the stretch of gnarled maple trees to his left and right. He saw Tomn as clearly as a camp fire in the middle of a field. Breathing slowly, he let his vision drift, trying to catch another glimpse of that puzzling movement. Where was it? He knew something was in the forest with them. Fear bloomed in his stomach.

"Maybe it's Cropper," Tomn whispered. "He's good at sneaking around."

Thealos remembered this feeling. It had happened in the streets of Dos-Aralon. It was happening again.

"I don't think so. Follow me, quickly."

Thealos pressed deeper into the maze of gullies and washes. His bow was ready. In the distance, he could hear the gentle rush of the river. Risking a backward glance, he tried to see what was stalking them. Had it followed him all the way from the human city? Or was it just now finding him again? Thealos didn't know what it was. But he felt it, a presence in the darkness. Something living but that couldn't be seen by a Shae. It terrified him that something like that could exist.

"Ban it," Tomn cursed, stumbling in a rut and landing on his arms. He massaged his elbows and righted himself. They crossed a thin grove, hopping over a small ravine to the other side. Each step brought them closer to the churning murmur of the river.

Then Thealos heard the noise in the distance. Tannon's camp had been roused. A cry of alarm went up, followed by shouts and curses. Thealos squeezed his eyes shut and nearly swore in frustration. They were so close he could feel the Silvan magic beneath his boots. Without his money, without his dagger, he needed the weapon that the Crimson Wolfsman had trusted to save him from the Sinew dragon. The trust had failed, but he knew the magic was waiting, dormant. He could taste it in the air now, a coppery flavor of metal and fire.

"I told you! I warned you Tannon, but you wouldn't listen to me!" It was Cropper's voice, bitter and angry and distant.

"Find them," the angry leader roared. "Find them both!"

Tomn's voice was a frantic whisper. "Are we almost there? They're as mad…"

"We're close," Thealos promised, scanning the trees ahead. Rising from the gully ahead of him, Thealos caught the glimmer of cool blue light. It was dim – so faint it could have been the moon reflecting in a pond. But the light caught his eyes and held them. He crushed the urge to dash forward and approached cautiously. The glow did not change.

"There! Do you see it, Tomn?" he asked, pointing towards the light.

Tomn squinted. "See what?"

He smiled. "When you found the dead Wolfsman, was it this close to the river?"

"I…I think so. I couldn't find it in the dark. Not now. You know where it is?"

Thealos squeezed his arm. "Follow me."

They went forward and came to another gully. Peering down into it, Thealos saw the glow coming from the water of a small pond at one end. Bracken swirled on the surface and the gully water trickled slowly on the far side of it, passing around a thick mesh of mud and leaves that bulged from the pond. Something was damming the gully, creating the little pond. His eyes grew wide. Rising from the earth nearby, he heard the mournful sound of death before jerking his head. He saw the crumpled skeleton of a dead Shae not twenty paces away. Gripping the fringe of swamp grass for support, Thealos lowered himself down the gully wall. He landed with a little splash in ankle-deep water and his feet sank in the mud. He pulled the arrow back, bending the bow quietly with a broadhead arrow ready to fly.

Thealos walked a few paces. "The Wolfsman is over here," Thealos said, hurrying to the body. He breathed faster, listening to the sounds of pursuit in the woods. It would take Tannon and the others a little while to track them.

"How in Pitan did you find it?" Tomn muttered in astonishment. He followed Thealos down and crouched down in the mud. "This is it! Sweet hate, you found it!" His grin was triumphant.

Thealos examined the body quickly. It had been robbed of all value and recognition. Its bones moldered in the damp swamp. A small dusting of leaves and leeches covered it, and Thealos quickly brushed them off like roach moths on a cloak. He traced the bones with his finger, feeling the potency of the Wolfsman's agonizing death sting his nose like pepper. His eyes watered.

"We didn't kill him," Tomn promised, seeing the tears in Thealos's eyes.

"I know. Looks like the Sinew dragon surprised him. Took his leg off." The bone was snapped and splintered, mid-thigh. "He must have dragged himself this far before collapsing." Thealos sighed. "He bled to death, Tomn. Quickly."

"Oh," the cook replied glumly. "Did he die…right?"

Thealos shook his head. Kneeling quietly in the mud, he crossed his hands before him. "Keasorn in Eroth," he prayed softly, using the ancient tongue of his people, "Welcome the soul of Jade Shayler back to your light and face. He died with your love in his heart." He swallowed, steeling himself. "Shenalle protect us from the Firekin. Shenalle protect us and keep us. Shenalle bring peace to the troubled…"

A bobbing streak of light went through the trees at the top of the gully. Thealos could hear Tannon's band fighting the twisted maples, searching their direction. Cropper's voice was raw and furious.

Thealos clenched his teeth and hurried the rest of the prayer. "Keasorn guide my arrows. Keasorn give me courage to strike my enemy. Vannier grant me luck. Vannier give me cunning. In the name of the three gods, grant my prayer."

"Thealos," Tomn warned. "They're coming!"

Opening his eyes, Thealos swallowed his impatience. He left the broken skeleton in the gully brook and went back to the pond. From above, he hadn't seen it very clearly. From the bottom, he could easily see the mound blocking the flow of the brook. It looked like a tree had fallen into the gully, but its long shape was twisted and contorted. Raising the bow, he aimed for the bulge. He let it fly.

The arrow penetrated the mud, sticking into something solid. He waited and Tomn watched curiously. "The dragon is dead," he announced confidently. "Come on, Tomn, help me dig it out." He slid the bow around his shoulder.

Crossing into the pond, the two dug into the earth with their hands. Mud slid down Thealos' arms, but it also fell away from the stiff bony hide of a Sinew dragon. There was no life magic pulsing beneath the shell-like scales. Turning, he plunged his hands into the mud at the bottom of the shallow pond. The water went up to his elbows and then up higher. Dropping to his knees, not caring how wet he got, he dug his fingers toward the eye sockets. The light grew brighter as he sifted through the water and debris. And then, between two bony knobs, he touched the hilt of a sword. Silvan Magic screamed in his ears.

"They went this way," Jurrow panted. "See? Two sets of tracks. Can't be far, Tannon!"

"I'll kill that whoreson," Tannon roared. "I'll split his head in half!"

"Quit gabbing!" Hoth seethed. "Beck, over here. I think I see something."

Gritting his teeth, Thealos heaved at the sword. It wouldn't budge. He turned around, straddling where he thought the neck of the dragon was, and bent his knees. "Help me lift it," he urged Tomn. The water soaked his cloak and pants. Keeping his back straight, he clamped his fingers over the dragon's snout and lifted again. Tomn dug into the mud behind him and hoisted. Thealos felt the tendons in his neck bulge with the strain, and it started to move. The mud hissed and gurgled and it came higher and higher.

He let out his breath and then tugged again, feeling the strain on his calves and arms and back. "Keasorn, please!" he groaned. They came up suddenly – sword and dragon head, both with a splash. A glare of blue light stung his eyes as the blade shimmered in the night air. It was a Silvan short sword of such workmanship that he gasped. The hilt had the impression of a wolfs-head with

two glittering green-blue gems as eyes. There was no rust or tarnish, and its blade was keen and sharp. The blade was aimed down, lodged in the dragon's skull right over the eye sockets.

"Sweet, holy Achrolese!" Tomn whispered in shock, staring at the Crimson Wolfsman blade. "Look at it!" His eyes shone with greed and astonishment. "It must be worth a thousand pieces…worth a kingdom!"

"Look!" It was Jurrow's voice and then he heard the sound of boots dashing towards the gully. "It's brighter than the moon. Over there!"

Thealos stared at the weapon. There was probably other treasure around in the clutch, probably deep in the bottom of the swamp. He had led them right to it. But how could he give Tomn such a noble weapon – a weapon of fine steel and charmed with Silvan magic? Its power belonged to the Shae, not to the humans who desecrated everything they touched.

The weapon looked almost hot to touch, so Thealos used the hem of his cloak and wrapped it around the blade. The light winked out as he folded the cloak around it. Then planting his foot on the dragon's snout, he yanked the hilt. It grated free and he could feel it tingling beneath the cloth.

"Give it to me!" Tomn insisted, his palm reaching. He trembled with anticipation. His eyes danced with emotion. "Sweet Achrolese, let me touch it! Give it to me!"

"Ban it!" Hoth screamed, "It's gone. Tannon – the lantern!"

"Tomn…" Thealos hedged. The cook lunged for it, but the mud-sucking pond slowed him. Thealos retreated towards the fallen Wolfsman, feeling the Silvan steel's reassurance. The blade belonged to the Shae.

"Give it to me!" Tomn roared, anger now sparking in his eyes. "You promised!"

"Tomn," Thealos hedged again. "This is a Shae weapon. I led you to the clutch. Please, the others are coming…"

"You banned liar!" Tomn shrieked. "You bleeding liar! Cropper was right! You knew…you knew about this all the time! I…I believed you!"

"Believed what?" Thealos demanded, his patience snapping. "You stole my money, my weapons! You held me against my will. Your friends were going to kill me. Listen to me, Tomn. A weapon like this doesn't belong with your people. You don't know anything about this kind of magic. It would destroy you."

"Liar!" Tomn cursed, holding his dagger out. "Nothing but liars. Tannon!" he screamed. "Over here!"

A beacon of lamplight shot across the trees overhead. They were at least forty paces away and charging. The gully was tight and would be easy for them to follow. He had to make it into the forest. By the time they found his trail, he would be out of the wood and running. If he could keep ahead of them, he would make it to Sol and then to the Shae in Jan-Lee. Then he would be safe.

"I'm sorry, Tomn," Thealos said coldly. "But this is mine."

Rage twisted on the cook's face. He flailed at Thealos, swiping the dagger in the air before him, trying to stab the elusive Shae as he retreated deeper into the gully.

Boots cracked the twigs and roots behind him.

Spinning around, Thealos saw Beck and Hoth sliding down the gully wall, cutting off that way of retreat. They looked furious. Gripping the bundle under his arm, he unslung the short bow.

"This way! Over here!"

Thealos ducked to the outside of Tomn's thrusting dagger and swung the short bow around, cracking it against the side of his head. It dazed him, just enough for Thealos to slip by. He was halfway across the pond when Tannon's lantern reached the scene, throwing light across his back.

He slogged through the pond, struggling to reach the other side where he could run.

"Cropper, get him! Hoth and Beck, he's right there!"

Thealos knew he'd never make it, not with that light exposing him. He let the bundle drop and slipped a steel-tipped arrow out of his quiver. Aiming, he shot at Tannon. The arrow hit the lantern, spinning it out of the soldier's grip, spraying oil and shards of glass as it sailed into the trees. The flame hissed out in the damp. The soldiers hooted with dismay as darkness blanketed the gully. The glare of the Silvan short sword was dim beneath the waters of the pond. It sank quickly.

Scanning the edge of the gully, Thealos found Cropper running ahead of him and launched another arrow with a feeling of overdue vengeance. Cropper grunted with pain as the arrow tore into his ribs, and he fell to the gully floor in a heap.

"He got Cropper!" Tannon bellowed. "Kill him! Kill the whoreson!"

Plunging into the pond, Thealos used his cloak and wrapped the blade up in it again. He took time to stuff it into his belt before wading through the pond towards the other side, closer to the river. If he could make it to the Trident, he could lose them downstream. Dripping and soaking, Thealos scampered down the gully floor, away from Tannon and Beck and Hoth. They were close, but the dark would hide him. Passing over Cropper, he didn't see the knife waiting for him.

Pain sent fire up his leg as the wounded soldier dug a dagger into his thigh. The arrow had stunned and wounded him, not killed him.

"You Shaden whelp!" Cropper seethed, stabbing him again. "You stinking, bleeding Shaden!"

Thealos was bleeding. The pain crumpled his leg and he went down, dropping the bow. He felt the dagger sink into his leg again as he twisted to free himself. He kicked Cropper in the face, as hard as he could. He felt the man's jaw snap and it sickened him. Tannon and the others were hurrying over to help. Tomn shrieked like a madman, yelling that the blade was his.

Thealos grabbed the gnarled veins of tree roots exposed on the gully wall and pulled himself to his feet. The dagger stuck into his leg painfully. He wouldn't be able to run now. He had to fight them or die. He pulled the dagger out of his leg and tossed it.

Cropper had sagged down with the blow and shook his head, trying to rouse himself. Thealos twisted the Shae weapon out of the folds of his tangled cloak. He let the sodden weight of the cloak drop as he felt the Silvan magic explode inside him, reacting to his need. It made him gasp for an instant. Fire rushed through his arm into his chest. It was a beautiful weapon – with a leaf-shaped blade and silverwork hilt. The blade came down on its own, a living thing. The pain in Thealos' leg vanished, numbed by the rush of magic. Cropper howled with fear and agony as Thealos cut him down. Blood spattered on his hands and face, warm and wet. He tasted it on his lips. Trembling, Thealos stared at the dead man at his feet. The magic swept through him like a whirlwind. He felt no guilt.

Jurrow jumped down into the gully behind him. Thealos turned like a shift in the wind, meeting the cleaver polearm with a flash of Silvan steel. The metals clashed with a hiss of sparks. Then Jurrow went down, cut through by the power of the weapon, the blade of a Crimson Wolfsman. Thealos felt the rush of the magic intensify, felt his thoughts dance and tremble with joy. He loved it, the tastes and fears and deliciousness of it. Some part of his mind told him that his knee was throbbing, that he was bleeding, but he ignored it. The Silvan Magic roared like a hearthfire inside of him. He no longer feared Tannon's band. He wanted to kill them all. He would enjoy killing them.

Beck and Hoth met him in the mouth of the gully, free of the pond at last. He saw Tannon in the heights above him and Tomn just beyond their shoulders. Four against one.

"Should have killed you yesterday," Hoth said menacingly, holding his sword defensively.

"Yes," Thealos agreed. "You should have."

"I get the sword," Beck announced.

Thealos charged him, ready to slice him from navel to throat. His leg collapsed beneath him, unable to support the weight any longer. Panicked, he struggled to free himself of the mud that hugged his shirt and pants. Hoth's boot stamped on his wrist – he felt his bone snap. Beck tried prying the blade from his fingers, but Thealos tightened his fist, screaming. He was losing control of the magic. Pain crowded into his thoughts. He didn't want to face that pain.

"Hit him! Kill him!"

On his knees, Thealos struggled against the two, but he felt his grip loosen. His leg screamed from the dagger wounds. Hoth and Beck were fighting each other to get the Silvan short sword away from him. Desperately, Thealos used his free arm to jerk a knife from Hoth's belt. Tomn screamed, shoving at Beck to grab at the sword. When Thealos raised the dagger against Hoth, he felt Tannon's knife in his back.

His grip slackened and the world crashed in on him, pain and agony and despair. His wrist was broken, his leg cut into ribbons. He'd never felt so much pain in his life, all charging in at once. He tried to grab the dagger out of his back, but he couldn't reach it. Slumping into the gully water, he watched in a daze as Tannon joined them from above. He was going to die. They would kill him for sure and toss his body in the river.

"My father…will pay you," Thealos whimpered, struggling to drag himself away from the soldiers who fought to claim the blade. "He'll pay you…" Nausea turned to fear, cold and silent in his stomach. Tannon scattered the others and turned them against him.

"Too late, Shaden," the soldier seethed. "He'll never know what happened to you." Even Tomn's eyes were pitiless. Beck and Hoth glowered at him.

"No," Thealos whispered, too weary to move. He cradled his wounded wrist. Terror washed into him, deeper than any knife. Spots danced in his eyes as the shock settled into his bones. He was going to faint. What have I done! What have I done!

"Kill him," Tannon spat.

A subtle movement flickered in the corner of Thealos' eye. He collapsed as the killing began.

# X

It was the pain that brought Thealos awake. Hungry, screaming, bone-throbbing agony. He shuddered and crouched beneath the folds of sleep and waking, fearful to slip too far to either side. The feeling of being alone, abandoned by the gods, was almost too much to bear. But he wanted to live, not die in the swamp like the Crimson Wolfsman had, his body left to rot with worms. Cautiously, he let himself drift closer to the source of his life, preparing for the damaged body he would meet. It hurt to move, to breathe. Light stabbed his eyes, and he wondered how he could be feeling the sun in the depths of a gully.

Something wasn't right. Instead of damp mud with poking roots and hard pebbles, he was lying on a warm wool blanket. He smelled fresh cinders and the tang of a wood fire. It took a moment of struggle to open his eyes.

"You're alive," the man told him gently.

Thealos blinked. He tried to move his arm to scratch his face, but it screamed with pain and wouldn't move. It was bound tightly to his body by a cloth sling. Glancing around, Thealos saw a small grove of broad-leaf oak, free of the death and ugliness of the scarred maple forest.

"Here, let me help you sit up," the stranger suggested from behind. He felt strong arms cradle his neck and lift him up. He wanted to sob with pain. Looking down, he saw blood spattered on his clothes.

"Sweet Vannier," Thealos gasped. "The blood! Is it all mine?"

"No," the stranger chuckled, coming around in the light where Thealos could see him. With his tanned face and wider shoulders, the man was certainly human, but his eyes were classically Shae – grey with streaks of ice and green. His dark hair with gold tints was cut just above the shoulders. He was of medium build and had a handsome face with a cynical twist to his mouth. He was clothed only in black. A long tapered sword was belted across his hips with a curious symbol etched into the steel pommel. An identical symbol hung from the stranger's neck – a bronze medallion of an 'X' within the borders of an octagon. Thealos looked from the stranger's hands to his face. The cowl of the cloak was down. He gave off a comforting smell, something akin to a cedar chest and well-worked leather.

"Have you had a good enough look yet?" the stranger asked pointedly, aware that Thealos was staring.

"I'm sorry," Thealos stammered. Distrust welled up in him instantly. "How did you find me?" He didn't know whether Tannon's Band had left him for dead or not. Something nagged at his memory, but it was hazy now. They should have killed him. Why hadn't they?

Behind the stranger, near the fire, Thealos saw the polished blade of Jade-Shayler and the Crimson Wolfsman shawl. There was also the dagger, still stained with blood. He looked at the stranger warily.

The stranger followed his gaze. "I saved those for you," he said. "You may need them where we're going."

"I don't understand."

"I saved you from those soldiers," the stranger replied. "I think you owe me something for that."

"They took all my money," Thealos answered. His shoulder throbbed.

"It's over in that pile." The man pointed to another heap. He saw glittering Aralonian pieces,

the hoppit doll from Arielle, even the gown that Tomn had showed him. "I don't have any need of those things. I have need of you."

"Who are you?"

The stranger smiled. "You ask that in the same way you'd ask a pirate. I'm not going to hurt you or ransom you. My name is Jaerod." He looked deeply in Thealos' eyes.

"Am I your hostage then? You said I was going with you."

"I don't take hostages," Jaerod replied. "Tell me. Have you ever been to the Shoreland?"

"Only to Jan-Lee," Thealos replied. "Is that where you are going?"

"No, I'm on my way to Sol." He smiled, but Thealos didn't trust him. "I'd like you to come with me."

"And why would I want to go with you to Sol?"

Jaerod's eyes said more than his mouth. He looked at Thealos as if he'd known him for a long, long time. It was a strange…familiarity. "Because I know something your Silvan queen would want to know. Information her council and the Sunedrion would value." He smiled wryly. "But I don't think she would believe it coming from a human, do you?"

"And why would I want to give King Silverborne a message for you?" Thealos demanded. "He's the ruler of Avisahn, not his daughter." He was grateful that the stranger had saved him from Tannon's Band. But he didn't feel any more certain that he was free.

The reply came in perfect Silvan. "Silverborne is a doting old fool who can't even remember his name anymore. It's quite obvious to anyone with sense that his daughter is the one who truly rules. But you already knew that. They would listen to you if what you knew could save them. I'm doing this because I'm a friend of the Shae." Jaerod's dialect was fluent. "Or should I say, I'm a Shaefellow. What is your name?"

"Thealos Quickfellow."

"Thealos Quickfellow," the other whispered. "Now that is a proper Silvan name. Is it from your father's or your mother's family?"

"If you know so much about my people, you should already know that," Thealos answered. The dialect was fluent, but that didn't increase Thealos' trust. "Quickfellow. It comes from…"

"Your Correl's naturally," Jaerod finished. "But that's not how it was done before Ravindranath. Back then, the father's name split with the mother's – if they were both noble blood. Silvermere became Silverborne. Only between nobles though."

Thealos stared at him curiously. "You know the Shae well for a human."

Jaerod looked at him blandly. "I'll try and take that as a compliment." He squatted low in front of Thealos, examining the cuts and bruises. "If I'm finished impressing you with how well I speak your language, perhaps I can help you. You won't get to Sol very quickly in this condition, so we'd better do something about it."

Thealos hadn't promised to go with him yet, but he held his tongue. "Are you a healer?"

The stranger nodded and went to a damp pouch at his waist. Thealos watched the quick fingers untie the strings. He stared apprehensively, expecting to see the flat brown leaves of tobacflower wet with stinging juttleberry juice. It made a salve that stung worse than hornets but it was effective in curing most wounds. Instead, the stranger turned over the pouch and withdrew a dripping clump of green moss. It was green with streaks of blue and even violet. Thealos had never seen moss like that before – not in the darkest forests of Avisahn.

"Are you ready, Thealos?" Jaerod asked, holding the clump.

"What is that?"

"Show me your hand."

Thealos leaned forward, grunting with the pain in his ribs. He extended his grubby palm towards the stranger, curious. Jaerod took the moss and pressed the cool wet mass into Thealos's hand.

Silvan Magic. There was a whirlwind of sound and color that rushed through Thealos' senses like a storm. His back arched with the jolt and shock of it, as if tongues of soothing fire caressed him. It didn't burn his skin – it burned inside his heart hotter and hotter. He felt the Silvan Magic penetrate him, seeking and twisting through his marrow and joints, playing across his back. It was wonderful, tantalizing. The buds of the moss smelled like flowers and fresh thyme. The crooked break in his arm fused itself whole, the gashes and stab-wounds of his back knitted closed. He watched with astonishment as the cut in his leg closed shut, leaving no trace, no scar. The chorus swelled in his ears, music unlike anything he had heard. He savored it. Relished it. Feasted on it! He could not have spoken his own name if he had wanted to. Gasping for breath, Thealos felt the magic heal him. Even the spot on the back of his head where Cropper had clubbed him. He no longer remembered the pain.

It lasted only moments. The savory rush winked out, banished back into the colorful moss. It shriveled with the efforts. But Thealos stared at it in his open palm, feeling the power hidden within its damp spores.

Jaerod uncorked a flask of water and poured it out over the plant. It was fresh river water, cold and icy. Thealos' fingers went numb, but he stared at the magic he cupped in his hand. As the water drenched the buds, they slowly quivered, sending out fresh little shoots. It was smaller than before, but it was still living, still growing.

Jaerod cocked his head. "Now are you ready to listen to what I have to say?"

"This is Silvan Magic," Thealos said in awe, looking at him anew.

"I know. The Shae brought it here."

"Here?"

"To this world," Jaerod explained. "It is the strongest of the Earth Magics from the world the Shae came from. And it thrives very nicely here too."

"What is it?" Thealos demanded.

"Its name is the same in both tongues. We call it Everoot."

"Everoot." He stared down at the colorful moss. It still tingled in his hand, whispering to his Shae senses comfortingly. "The magic is still there, I can feel it."

"I know," the stranger said with a nod. "And I knew you would." He opened the small sack and brought it closer for Thealos to look within. There was more of the Everoot inside.

Tilting his hand, Thealos dropped the small bud back inside. "Where did you get it?"

A wry smile passed over the stranger's face. "And just a moment ago, you weren't all that interested in what I had to say. As I told you, I think your little queen would want to know about this. It's growing down in the Shoreland – west of Sol near the fortress of Landmoor. That's where I am going. And you, if you'll come with me." He twisted the knots and fastened it again to his belt. Rising, he brushed off his black pants and rested his hand on the pommel of the long tapered blade.

"Do I really have a choice?" Thealos asked, studying him. He untied the cloth sling and stretched his arm. The bone was completely whole.

"I won't force you, Thealos," Jaerod replied. "I'm not a mercenary. I'll not kidnap you and drag you after lost treasure. I am a messenger, in a way. And you are part of that message. The way I look at it, you owe me your life, but whether you choose to honor that debt…I will leave that to you.

The gold coins and Wolfsman magic," he nodded to the leaf-blade short sword, "they mean nothing to me. If you do nothing else, tell your queen that you met someone who possessed Silvan Magic and knew where a grove of it could be found. Maybe she'll find that useful enough to act outside of Avisahn for once." He shrugged. "But I don't think so. There is so much she doesn't know."

"If I follow you, what then?" Thealos asked. "I'm still not sure what you want me to do. You may use our magic and speak in our tongue, but I don't know you. I don't even know what you are."

"There is really only one way to find out then, isn't there? Why don't you come with me as far as Sol and let me explain along the way why I need you. Besides, you don't really think you can go back to Avisahn right now, do you?" Something in his voice told Thealos that Jaerod knew exactly how little choice he really had.

* * *

In the end, it wasn't the small loaves of spiced-apple bread that made Thealos follow him. Or the cuts from ovals of sharp cheese or even the small sack of dried apple shavings and salted almonds. It was how he put out the fire.

Jaerod didn't let the coals burn low and leave the ashes and stumps of charred wood in the middle of the glen. He dropped a fistful of sapple-dust on the flames to suck the heat away, and then he carefully used a small trowel to bury the ashes and debris in the earth. He did it conscientiously, leaving no disturbance to mar his passing. It was a practiced maneuver, quick and effortless, not one awkwardly rehearsed in order to impress a Shae. He was demonstrating a respect for the land and the Rules of Forbiddance. A respect that had been taught by the Shae for thousands of years. Some humans, it seemed, had learned it even after all this time.

"Who are you, Jaerod?" Thealos asked as they hiked along the tall ridge of the valley just before dawn. To the east, the familiar rumble of the Trident showed the green fringe of the wood. To the west, he could see only the broad prairies and beautiful stands of elm and birch. It was a vast land, flat and low with rolling hills and high-looping hawks. Thealos' clothes were still damp from a quick wash in the river, but at least the dirt and blood were fading stains instead of the vivid reminder of what had happened to him in the gully. They were memories he intended to banish as quickly as he could.

"What do you mean?"

Thealos looked at him curiously. "I want to know how you found me in that wood with those soldiers. Did you happen upon us during…or after?"

"You knew I was there when you were dallying with the cook in the dark."

"I didn't see…"

"You knew I was there," Jaerod cut in. "Of course you didn't see me, but I was there."

"That was you?" Thealos said softly. "I knew something was following us. But why couldn't I see you?" Something snagged at his mind again, and he caught it. "You've been following me since Dos-Aralon, haven't you?"

Jaerod smiled smugly. "You remembered. Good."

"Why?"

"Why indeed? A Shae leaving Dos-Aralon before the gate curfew. Very curious. A Kilshae then – one of the banished ones? Perhaps. A Kilshae would have drowned his sorrows in ale… or worse." He shrugged. "A runaway, then. But from what?" He gave Thealos an arch look. "It didn't

take long to find out. The Council Elder of Vannier is as angry as a hornet swarm." He clucked his tongue. "I'm beginning to think you don't have any idea how to make friends."

"And how did you know about Nordain?" Thealos demanded.

"The news is all over Avisahn. Everyone is talking about it."

"You went to Avisahn?" Thealos asked in disbelief.

"Why should that surprise you?"

"It surprises me that you made it past the Crimson Wolfsmen! The city proper is guarded on every side. You can't cross the river without being seen by the watch."

"You seem to know a lot about what I can and cannot do."

Thealos could feel the mocking tone in his voice. "How did you get into the city then?"

"That's really not important. What's important is what they are saying about you in Avisahn right now. Nordain has kept your disappearance as hushed as possible, but everyone is talking about what you said in the council chambers."

Thealos cringed.

"You were wise to head south. They started looking for you in Dos-Aralon first, searching the places you might stop for money." He gave Thealos a wink. "It was clever of you to prepare so well in advance. But I already knew where you left and I had an idea where you were going. It didn't take very long to catch up to you. By then, of course, you had blundered into those renegade soldiers. The dregs of Dos-Aralon's army." He clucked his tongue again. "That wasn't clever. That was very foolish, Thealos. They could have killed you and left you for dead. If they had brought you back to Dos-Aralon right away, Nordain would have had you for certain. But," he added admiringly, "you handled yourself well until it came time to escape."

"Then Nordain is still looking for me?"

"Insurrection, Thealos. The Shae won't tolerate it. They've sent the Crimson Wolfsmen to bring you back. They're tracking us. Right now."

"I did not intend to start this," Thealos said defensively. He started walking a little faster, digging his hands against his sides. "Sweet hate, I'm not going to be able to go back there for a Silvan year at the least." He glanced up at Jaerod. "And so what you are really saying, Jaerod, is that if I had not chosen to come with you, the Crimson Wolfsmen would have found me?"

Jaerod shrugged and kept walking. "Would that have been my fault? I'm confident we can reach Sol before they find us. And by stopping at Sol first, we confuse the trail. They might expect you to go by ship to another land or city. They'll certainly be watching the river for you. And if we head straight to Landmoor, they'll catch us before we make it to the Shadows Wood." He glanced at Thealos. "I can help protect you, Thealos. If you went on without me, the Wolfsmen might catch you at any rate no matter where you went. And then you'd be brought back to Avisahn for treason."

Thealos grit his teeth. "That banned Nordain goaded me."

"You shouldn't have let him." He gave Thealos a sidelong look. "Certainly not a Shae with your family name."

"The only thing Quickfellow means in Avisahn is gold," Thealos snapped. "I'm the son of a barter, and only distantly related…"

"Distantly," Jaerod chuckled. "You could be the crown heir of Shampanelle with less noble blood than yours." He shook his head, irritated. "Save me your pathetic Shae humility. You know who your father is, where the Quickfellow family came from. Your father and his fathers have protected themselves by obscuring their name in Vannier's faith. Until you," he added, giving Thealos a sidelong look. "The Silverbornes have been watching your family for several generations. You were

allowed prominence and station, but weren't officially considered royalty. All for a reason, Thealos. All for a reason. And now Laisha Silverborne thinks you're out to raise a rebellion against her right to rule. I tell you, she's a clever girl. I don't think she'll let you get away with it…"

Thealos looked aghast. "But that's not what I…"

"Not what you intended?" Jaerod cut him off. He turned and gave Thealos a hard stare. "Then why else did you leave Avisahn in such an uproar, Thealos?"

"Because I wanted to learn about this land for myself," he replied defensively. "I don't trust her advisors or what they are saying. And she has never been outside of Avisahn in her life! But I have." He folded his arms angrily. "If we keep ourselves behind the river, the time will come when the humans will be strong enough to cross. If we wait to get involved until then, it will be too late."

"So what you are really saying is that you came to help start a war on this side of the river?" Jaerod's gray eyes glittered.

It was then that Thealos realized that once again he'd said too much.

# XI

The firelight danced and played in the intricate grooves of the finely crafted pommel. Thealos turned the blade over, examining the other side closely. The hilt had the fascinating impression of a wolfs-head with two glittering eyes that seemed to stare at him. He was amazed that there was no rust or splotches on the blade or hilt. But it was the blade that intrigued him the most. It was narrow, leaf-shaped, and sharper than anything he had ever touched. He was a little surprised at the heft and how light it felt in his hand. In the night air, it was cool to the touch, but he could feel the fire of its power buried deep within – sleeping. He remembered how it had felt when he faced off with Tannon's Band. Its power had numbed him to everything, even pain. That was so very dangerous, he decided.

Glancing up, Thealos looked at Jaerod. The human sat against a shaggy elm on the other side of the fire and cut pear slices with a small knife. Their evening meal had been shared in silence. Thealos noticed the tapered long sword he wore at his side. It was an elegant weapon.

"Was your weapon forged by the Shae?" Thealos asked, rubbing the blade of Jade Shayler with an oilcloth once more before slipping it back into his belt. Jaerod looked at Thealos with an amused smile and nodded. "And where did you get it?"

"Not from Avisahn," Jaerod replied enigmatically. "Do you want to see it?"

Thealos nodded, and Jaerod set the fruit and knife down and leaned forward, drawing the weapon from the leather sheath. Firelight glimmered across the narrow blade. Jaerod held it up for Thealos to see. There was a strange marking on the hilt, the one that matched the amulet around Jaerod's neck. It wasn't a Shae symbol, at least not one that Thealos recognized. Yet he could feel the power in the blade even as far away as he was. Silvan magic thrummed in the air.

"It must have cost a great deal," Thealos observed, nodding respectfully at the weapon.

"Actually it was a gift," Jaerod replied. He eased it gently in the sheath. "You've been quiet today, Thealos." He took a hunk of wood and tossed it on the fire. Sparks showered up in angry snaps. "You're upset about our discussion this afternoon?"

Thealos hugged his knees and stared at the flames. He knew from Jaerod's vantage, his eyes were probably glowing. "I said more than I should have." He glanced up at Jaerod and smirked. "I do that, you know."

"The tongue is the hardest to tame – especially for the young. And I'm very good at prying out secrets."

"I'm older than you," Thealos countered. "But if you know my people, you already knew that."

He smiled. "The Shae live longer than humans. The life magic in you is strong and it sustains you well in this world. This longevity is a gift, truly. It gives you a special affinity with the earth magic, which is a form of life magic too – if you don't mind me putting it that way."

Thealos was not offended. To the Shae, nearly everything was a living thing and had its own magic. But people were considered a higher order than animals and plants. Shedding the life of a man was never done on a whim, just as beasts were slain for food not sport, and his people preferred working stone for shelter than slaying trees. He continued to listen as Jaerod went on.

"You are more sensitive to the balance of magic than humans or even Drugaen. You have every right to be wary of those not of your race, Thealos. Experience and disappointment are cruel teachers. I still have to earn your trust. Just as you have to earn mine." He poked the fire with a

stick. "I understand your anger at what the humans have done to the valley. It used to belong to your people – from the Ravenstone to the Kingshadow. Imagine it – a forest that stretched across the entire way, cut into little ribbons by rivers and streams. It was a vast, beautiful kingdom. The Crimson Wolfsmen kept preserves for the king's hunting, and no man could pass or cross without using the Great Highway."

Thealos eyed Jaerod. He could well imagine what it used to be like during his elcorrel's days, but how did this Shaefellow know all this?

Jaerod took the charred stick and ground the embers into the dirt. "There was Avisahn, of course – the king's city. But there were also watchposts built to unite the valley as one." He poked the stick around the dirt, leaving pockmarks of ash. "Jan Lee, Jove Stand, Citidellian, Novune, Sol, Kirae." Each black mark Jaerod pressed into the dirt showed a web around the main one. "And we can't forget Jenterhome," he finished, stamping another mark far south of the first one. "Only a few remain under the control of the Shae now. They were built to preserve the Silvan way." The gray eyes lifted at Thealos across the fire. "We're going to one right now. It was the first watchpost to be surrendered to the humans of Aralon."

"Sol," Thealos said, nodding. "The river city. We still control Jan Lee though."

Jaerod shook his head. "Sol was a Shae watchpost. But it was not the first to fall. We're going to Jenterhome. They call it Landmoor now." He prodded the farthest scorch mark.

Thealos leaned back and studied the human thoughtfully. Had he learned this from the Shae somehow or was it some druid-priest teaching? "Only the older scholars know this much about Shae history. Where did you learn this? Parath-Anatos?"

He shook his head. "I've been to Landmoor, Thealos. The governor of the Shoreland commands the garrison at the castle. But Landmoor is built on top of an abandoned Shae watchpost. The old records of the city…they are still there. If you can read old Silvan, they talk about what it was like back then. What an interesting picture. Long before the Purge Wars. Back during the time of the Empire of Sol don Orai."

"Before the humans came," Thealos said, nodding. "I still don't understand why you are telling me this."

"Maybe because you were not being very talkative tonight," Jaerod replied with a wink. "I told you that I am a Shaefellow. I believe in your people. I believe that you were sent to this world to save it. Not many humans believe that any more. The Druid-priests of Parath-Anatos certainly don't preach it."

"And you don't think it's wrong to want to take the valley back?" Thealos asked.

"I don't think it is wrong to want to defend yourselves. The gods know you are hopelessly outnumbered," he added dryly. "But do you even know why the humans control so much of your homeland? The history behind it? Or that aside, do you truly believe in what your people came here for?" His eyes narrowed challengingly. "There is always a balance. Always a reason why things happen the way they do."

Thealos felt a little goaded, but he tried to keep control of his patience. "Do I truly believe in why we came here? Is that what you're asking? We came here to save you from destroying your world and to teach you how to heal it again," Thealos replied. "We saved you, all right, and we taught you…but you would not learn and remember."

Thealos stretched his legs out, looking up at the northern sky where he saw the smooth blue light of Eroth. "That has been the more difficult challenge for us, I think. We have tried teaching you about the dangers of fire, yet in nearly every human city it is abused. Every other year, a fire burns

out of control in Dos-Aralon, ruining sections of the city and destroying homes and lives. Yet before the ashes can be swept away and the scorch marks painted over, another one breaks out, repeating the lesson. Over and over, it happens. We tried to teach you about ale and mead and other things Forbidden to drink, yet there is no limit to the breweries or drunkenness. The deaths caused by back-alley stabbings, squabbling over who gets the last sip. We tried to teach that marriage is honorable, a commitment…"

"Perhaps the humans learned more from you than you think," Jaerod interrupted softly. "Hypocrisy is so easy to pick up and so difficult to put away."

Thealos gave him a dark look. "Are you saying we are all hypocrites?"

"In one way or another, Thealos, we all are," Jaerod replied with a sardonic chuckle. "I'm not criticizing you. Just making an observation." He stopped, cutting another slice off his pear. Bringing it to his mouth, he chewed slowly and continued. "When you try to teach someone over and over again and they don't seem to be picking it up, maybe you should look again at how the message is being delivered. But why am I trying to convince you of this? Isn't that one of the reasons you left Avisahn? One of the reasons you couldn't go along as a chapel monk or join the Shae army or fritter your Silvan year learning an artisan trade? You wanted a taste of freedom, to experience life for yourself without every little action being prescribed by a Rule of Forbiddance. You recognized the hypocrisy of your nation and chafed under it. It only stings because I'm pointing it out to you. The Shae may admit that hypocrisy to themselves, but never to those outside their culture. To do so would be to admit that they've botched their quest rather completely." He smirked. "And most humans don't even know what really happened at Ravin-Dranath. When the Shae almost annihilated themselves."

Thealos listened quietly. He fumed for a moment before realizing that he couldn't be angry at Jaerod for speaking the truth. He had had those exact thoughts himself. Staring across the fire at Jaerod, he replied, "I'll concede your point, then. If you'll concede that you are using me to your own ends. I don't think it was random chance that brought us together – not in the streets of Dos-Aralon, and not by the river when you saved me. You found me for a reason, Jaerod. Let's not be hypocrites with each other. Tell me why you're really here and what you expect from me."

Jaerod nodded. "More than fair. I doubted I would have been able to convince you to go with me to Landmoor unless I told you why. Let me try a little bluntness. We'll see if it works. I need you, Thealos, but not for my own ends. What I mean by that is it's my responsibility right now to prevent a terrible destruction – a destruction that has happened in the past and will happen again if we don't try to stop it. This destruction will come about because of the Everoot, this plant that healed you. I need you because of who and what you are. You are a Shae, but not just any Shae. You are the descendent of one of the noble Silvan houses. The House of Silver rules in this valley, but the House of Quick ruled longer. I am here to bring you to Landmoor – to the Shae watchpost of Jenterhome – because a warding that guarded the Everoot has been destroyed."

Thealos froze in the midst of warming his hands by the fire. From what little he knew of the Shae warders, it took strong magic to break a warding – the strongest of magics. The words had come from Jaerod's mouth almost casually, but there was so much sincerity in his eyes that pierced Thealos' heart. He listened closely as Jaerod continued.

"If we do not act quickly, those unfriendly to the Shae will use the Everoot to dominate and eventually destroy this valley. But the Shae knew this when they set the warding over the Everoot. They knew that someday the warding might fail. They also created and concealed a talisman to defend themselves if the Everoot were ever used against them. But you see, only a descendent of the

original Quicksilver family can retrieve that magic. Neither can any ordinary Shae who worships Keasorn, Shenalle, or Vannier. I will explain more of the history of why this has happened along the way. There are reasons why it has taken this long for the warding to be discovered. It was set in place five hundred years ago back when Sol don Orai was destroyed – yes, by the Everoot. And there are those who would kill you for being an heir of Quicksilver. That is why I came for you, Thealos. I am here to protect you as best I can and to bring you to the Shoreland to fetch that talisman."

Thealos stared at him, speechless for a moment. "What are you?" he whispered, awestruck by the revelation. "If you're not a…a Wolfsman, then…"

"I am a Sleepwalker."

Thealos swallowed. He felt his heart hammering in his chest. He rubbed his eyes, trying to get control of himself. His emotions seethed inside his chest. Was this all true? Yet everything Jaerod had said was burning inside him. "I don't understand. The Crimson Wolfsmen are the guardians of the Shae. They should be the ones to…" He stopped, struggling with the thought. "Are only… humans allowed to be Sleepwalkers?"

"We are not the Crimson Wolfsmen. They are in similitude of my order. If you are really asking if a Shae can become one, then the answer is yes. Most of my peers are Shae. You refer to whether we use Forbidden magic?" Thealos nodded hesitantly. "As I told you, everything is in balance. Life magic and earth magic can be used two ways. The Shae use them as they should, as they were meant to be used. To heal, to protect, to defend. One practices Forbidden magic by using these magics inappropriately."

Reaching at his waist, Jaerod quickly untied the string and withdrew a clump of shriveled Everoot. Uncorking his water flask, he poured it out on the plant. The tiny sprigs turned a rich green and the blue and violet winked back vibrantly. "And even this magic can become Forbidden if used the wrong way." He gave Thealos an arch look. "It is the same with Sleepwalkers. There are some who use what they are taught in Forbidden ways. But this amulet I wear and this sword at my side… these can only be used by those who have chosen to fight Forbidden magic in all its forms. One is a shield and the other a weapon against all forms of Firekin."

"Firekin." Thealos said it with a shudder. Just hearing the word made him afraid.

"It translates from Silvan poorly, doesn't it? The power of night doesn't begin to describe its myriad of nuances. There are forces at work in this valley stronger than my amulet or my sword. But the talisman that was abandoned and forgotten in Landmoor is stronger than any Firekin. It was created by the Shae to be so. Strong enough to protect you… and your people."

Thealos nodded solemnly. "I've never…this has never happened to me before." He shook his head slowly. "I felt…compelled to leave Avisahn. That if I stayed there a day longer, I would lose myself. I thought I knew why, but now I'm not sure." He scratched his scalp and sighed heavily. "You know so much about us, Jaerod, about our ways, about what is happening down here in this country. You say you are a Shaefellow, and I believe you." He swallowed, wondering what he should say. "And I've heard that some humans are allowed to live in Avisahn. If they renounce Dos-Aralon and swear to abide by the Rules of Forbiddance. Do you worship one of the Shae gods?"

"Keasorn, Shenalle, and Vannier?" Jaerod's eyes twinkled. "No, Thealos. No, I don't."

Thealos was disappointed, but not surprised. "How can you be a Shaefellow and a Sleepwalker? You said many of your peers were Shae. Are they Kilshae then? Is our true way of life then just another culture to you? Something that fascinates you, like studying fire or listening to the wind?"

"Not at all," the Sleepwalker replied with a chuckle. Then his expression hardened. "I do not believe that the Rules of Forbiddance are truly commandments of the gods. I think they are rules made by men. And men, whether they are Shae or not, are full of hypocrisy. That is why I'm not welcome in Avisahn, Thealos Quickfellow. Or with the Druid-priests, or with the sundry religions of Dos-Aralon." The tongues of fire licked the cool night air. His gray eyes were deadly serious. "And maybe you and I are more alike than you're ready to believe."

**To be continued in the August 2002 issue of *Deep Magic*...**